

10-STORY ALL DIFFERENT! DETECTIVE MAGAZINE

SEPTEMBER

**CORPSE BEHIND
THE 8 BALL**

MYSTERY NOVELETTE
By J. LANE LINKLATER

10¢



FOUR AND TWENTY BLACKJACKS

Stirring Novelette
By W.T. BALLARD

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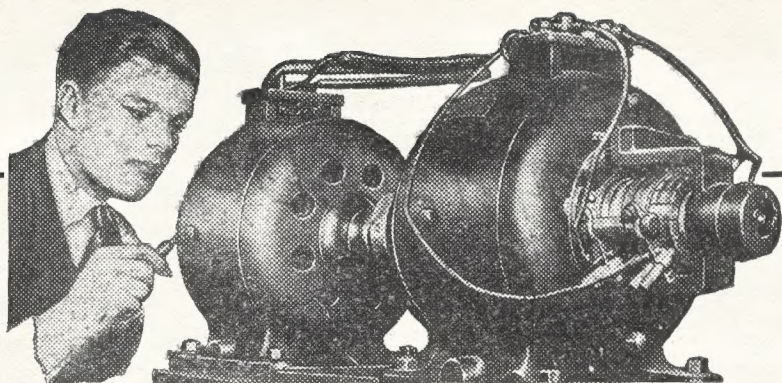
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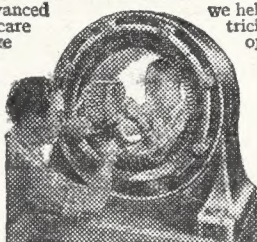
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10-STORY DETECTIVE

MAGAZINE

ALL STAR
ALL DIFFERENT

Vol. VI

SEPTEMBER, 1941

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Cover by Norm Saunders

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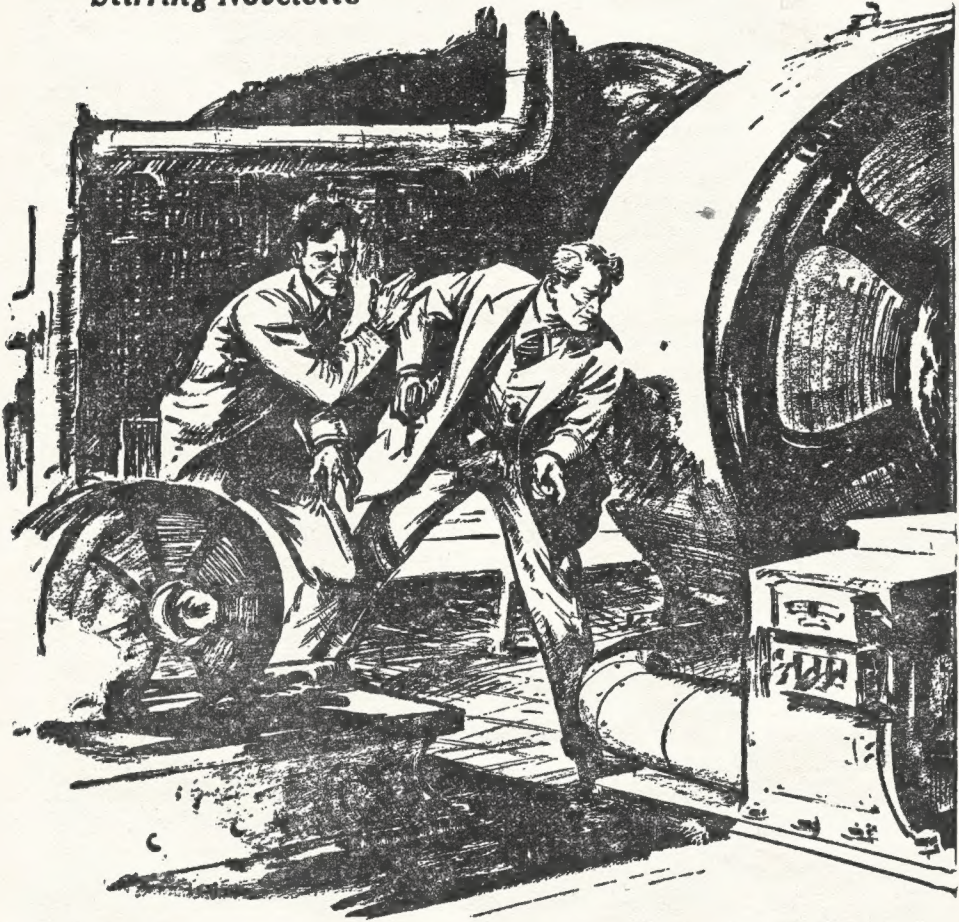
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Four and Twenty

Stirring Novelette



He had left his home seven years ago—an outcast framed for a forgery. But now he was back as a private dick to challenge a revival of that old indictment—and to try to save from destruction the town that had spurned him.

CHAPTER I

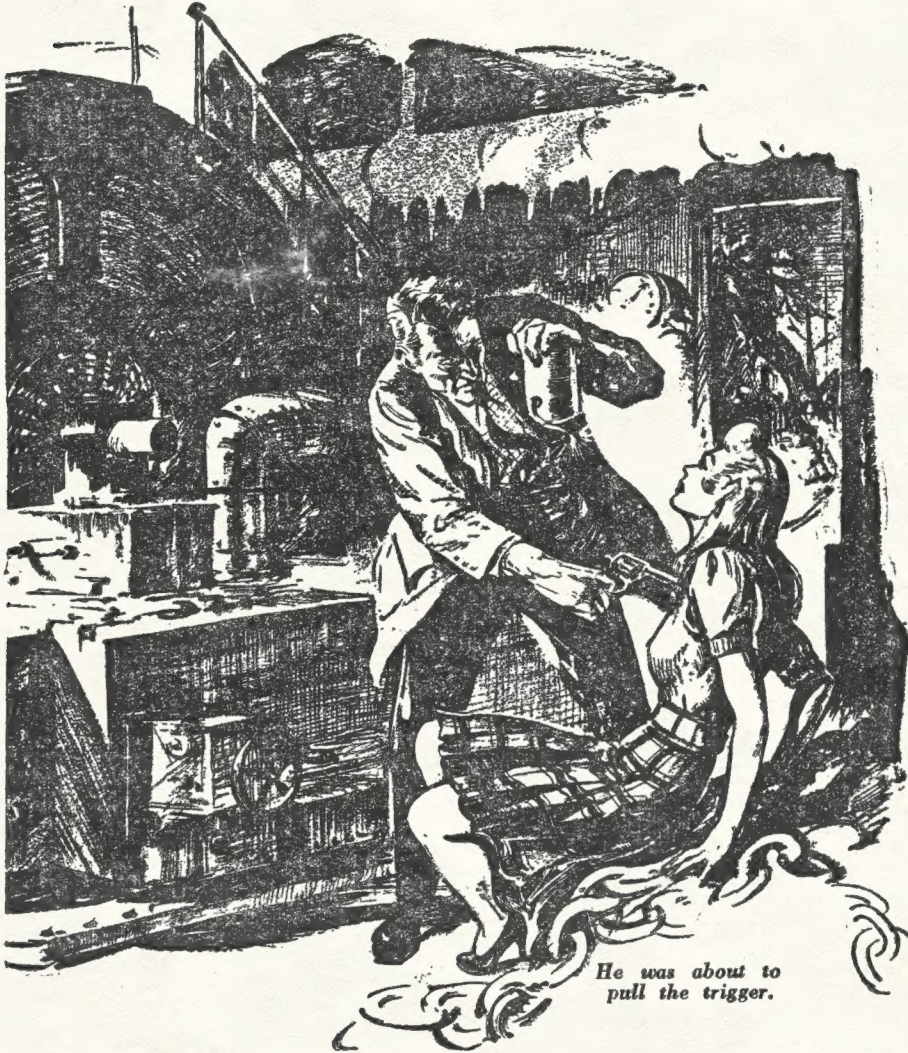
THE train which brought Guy Falkner home steered its panting way through the deep gorge and started the long seven mile

climb of Thorndyke grade.

Falkner shifted in his seat. He was a big man, shaggy as a bear, with heavy shoulders and powerful arms under the rough tweed of his coat. His face was tanned heavily and his

Blackjacks

By W. T. Ballard



eyes showed startling blue under the dark brows. He might have been an army officer on leave; a sportsman seeking a holiday. He looked like anything save what he was—a detective.

His eyes were cynical as he stared out at the slopes, lined with sugar pine and scrub. He'd pictured his return as different from this. He'd pictured himself a conquering hero, com-

ing back to the town which had rejected him.

From the corner of his eye he caught movement in the aisle and turned his head. Ellen Burton was standing there smiling at him as she had smiled a hundred times in the past. Then the smile went away, leaving her eyes shadowed and remote as they had been on the day he'd said

good-by to her, leaving immediately.

"Hello."

She was a small girl, looking smaller in contrast to his bigness as he struggled to his feet.

"Ellen."

She stepped into the section and sat down facing him. He reached out to take her hands, but she folded them in her lap, and the remoteness seemed more pronounced.

"This," he told her, "is a coincidence."

She shook her head. "No it isn't, Guy. I knew you were on this train. I boarded it at the last station."

He said: "That's better. That makes it great."

She unfolded her hands and held one up to stop him. "Wait until you know why I'm here. I've come to ask you not to get off at Sheldon. I want you to stay on the train."

IT WAS like cold water thrown at him. His eyes were narrow now, and hard, and the cynical lines around his mouth deepened.

"Why, Ellen?"

She said: "Because there's trouble there. No one in town wants this dam. They'll fight you any way they can."

He made a bitter mouth. "They fought me before. They took my timberlands and drove me out. I swore then that I'd be back."

She said: "But not this way. They'll stop at nothing, Guy. You know the town, and you know that you haven't got a chance."

"But I've got a job," he told her. "I was ordered here by the Los Angeles office. If I'm to hold that job I've got to stay. They ask for action, not excuses. I ran out once, kid. They whipped me then. I'd seen my father bankrupt, broken. I was too young then. I didn't know how to fight."

Her eyes moved over his face. "You've changed," she said, and he nodded.

"I've changed, and Sheldon changed me. We'll see how the town likes it."

"Then I've failed."

He watched her. It was like looking at a stranger. Seven years separated them—seven years of different environment, of different ideas.

He asked suddenly: "Who sent you to warn me? Your father?"

She didn't answer, and he laughed. It wasn't a pleasant sound. "All right, you've failed. Go back and tell them that. Tell them that murder and sabotage are going to stop, and that the boy they licked—the boy they drove away and then forgot—is going to stop them. Tell them that Guy Falkner is coming to Sheldon, and before he leaves they'll wish they'd never heard the name."

Without a word she rose, and she did not turn as she walked away. The last he saw of her was when she pulled open the door at the end of the car and disappeared.

He was a little embarrassed, a little ashamed. His speech had sounded melodramatic. He hadn't meant it that way, but he was hurt, and it was his way of trying to cover his wounds. . . .

Guy Falkner followed old Pete Durey out of the field office. He paused to stare across the yawning gulf toward the distant slope where the roofs of the city showed plainly a quarter of a mile away.

Below them the giant cats were kicking dirt over the bank, cutting a narrow path down the precipitous slope. Dust came up from the gravel washer to mushroom against the hot blue arch of the late afternoon sky. A box car rode downward into the canyon depth, looking like a black beetle dangling from the long steel cable.

It was a busy scene, peaceful, yet hurried. Hard to stand there and realize that death hovered over each move, each working man who labored in the cleft below.

THE man at Falkner's side was old. For fifty years Pete Durey had followed construction, fighting his way to the top by sheer force. It

had left its mark upon him, but his body was still straight and strong and his eye still level as he stared down at the job.

"She's big, son, and she's figured close. I've put every blue chip I own in the pot and she's got to be finished on time. The forfeiture bond will wipe me out."

"And do your bonding company no good." Falkner was thinking of the agency, of the men he worked for.

Durey nodded. "It's the town we have to lick." He indicated the distant roofs with a sweep of his hand. "They're little men, Falkner, standing in the way of progress."

Guy Falkner nodded. He knew all about the town—more than Durey did. He knew that Sheldon objected to this dam, objected to the tunnels which would take part of the impounded water through the mountains and dump it into the San Pasquel Valley for irrigation.

The fact that there was water enough for both valleys made no difference. Sheldon was selfish, grasping and greedy. They had fought the bill and now they were fighting the work. There had been tragedy. Eleven men had been killed in one of the tunnels.

That could have been an accident, but when the powder house blew up and two guards were killed, it was no accident. The guards had bullets in them.

It was then that the agency had sent him north to take charge of the office. He was here, and it was his business to see that the accidents ceased. He turned now, gave final instructions to Al Horst, his assistant, and moved toward Durey's car.

Below them the dam was already beginning to take shape. The forms for the lower sections and the power houses were already up. The concrete was rolling in.

Falkner brushed the hair out of his eyes. It was hot. "I'm glad I don't have to work in this hell-hole," he

told Durey as he settled his bulk in the seat of the car. "It would cook what brains I have."

The old man laughed and started the car up the winding trail. "You'll probably get them blown out," he warned. "These guys aren't just having fun. They're playing for keeps."

Falkner did not comment as the car reached the rim and turned west toward the bridge which would lead them into the town. He was silent, thinking, and his thoughts were far from pleasant.

It was a pretty town, and one he should have liked, but almost everything he saw brought back things which he did not wish to remember.

As he came into the office, his secretary told him: "A Mr. Carter Burton called. I told him you'd be back at five, so he said he'd be here by a quarter after."

Falkner snorted. He didn't want to see Burton. He walked over to the water cooler and filled a paper cup. His coat was over one arm and perspiration made dark patches on the tan of his shirt. He was about to say something when the door opened and Burton came in.

He was a small man with thin features, a tight little mouth and a close-clipped mustache. His eyes were shielded by horn-rimmed spectacles which gave him an owlish appearance.

CHAPTER II

FALKNER never liked him and he wasn't changing his opinion as he motioned the man toward his private office. Burton was president of the Sheldon Chamber of Commerce, and, as such, had led the fight on the dam.

He said: "Good afternoon, Guy." His voice was as precise as his mustache. "I was quite amazed that you dared come back to this city."

Falkner perched himself on one corner of his desk. "Yes?"

Burton said: "When we allowed you to depart seven years ago, the under-

standing was that you would never come back."

Falkner's mouth tightened. There'd been some notes in his father's safety deposit box. Those notes had been signed by several prominent Sheldon men. The court had held them to be forgeries, and the blame had gone to Guy. They'd let him off because of his age.

He said: "So you're going to bring that up?"

Burton spread his hands. "Understand, Guy, I'm only here to warn you for your own good."

Falkner's mouth twisted. "Like you had Ellen warn me on the train—"

Burton's mouth looked like a closed trap. "We will leave my daughter out of this. The very fact that the World Detective Agency hired you proves that it is not a legitimate company. We won't tolerate its presence in Sheldon. There will be no effort at terrorism of our citizens because they oppose the dam."

Falkner said: "You're a little late opposing it."

Burton told him harshly: "Our appeal is still pending, but that's not important. I'm here to suggest that you leave town, otherwise the police will move against you on the old charge." He turned and walked toward the door.

Falkner followed him out, stood by the secretary's desk until Burton had gone. She asked: "Trouble?"

He moved his big shoulders. "That old coot ran me out of town once. He's trying it again—" He broke off as the phone rang and reached across to pick it up.

Pete Durey was on the wire, and he was so excited his voice wavered. "Listen, Falkner. I just found out something. Be in your office at nine tonight." The instrument clicked before Guy could answer, and he hung up slowly.

The girl raised her eyebrows. "More trouble?"

He shrugged and looked at his

watch. "It's six. Come on, I need food and a shower."

She stood up. "I need a swim. I'm going down to the river with a couple of girls from the Y. W. Better come. One's a blond."

"From the Y. W.—"

She said: "Don't be snooty. This one is swell."

"I'll take a rain check," he told her. "I've got business tonight."

An hour and a half later he turned into the Sheldon Grill. His rather coarse dark hair was plastered wetly to his head, and his broad good-looking face was red from the heat. In the restaurant fans beat steadily, stirring up the hot air. He ordered a thick rare steak with lots of lettuce and thousand island dressing.

MOISTURE made a beaded line across his forehead and he wiped it away. His order had hardly been delivered when a man came over and slid onto the stool at Falkner's side. The man was in plain clothes but copper was written all over him. He took a badge from his vest and slid it onto the counter.

"McCosky. Headquarters."

Falkner squinted at the badge and went on eating. McCosky's little eyes, lost in the fat flabbiness of his cheeks, were on Falkner's steak. His mouth almost watered.

"I'm here to do you a favor, palo."

"Who sent you? Burton?"

McCosky looked aggrieved. "No one sent me. They're building a fire under you on that old rap."

Falkner cut another large piece of meat and transferred it to his mouth. "Better have some. Good."

The fat man swallowed twice, and little rivulets of perspiration jiggled down his nose. "Can't. I'm on a diet." He seemed very sad about it and sighed when Falkner finished and drained the iced tea glass.

"You going to leave?" he asked Guy.

Falkner rose and motioned for his check. "No." He found a crumpled

dollar bill and tossed it to the waitress.

The fat man said: "Then I'll have to take you downtown."

"Tomorrow." Falkner swung on his heel. He shouldn't have done that.

McCosky clipped him behind the ear. The whole ceiling of the restaurant whirled around, riding on the blades of the swirling electric fan. Falkner found himself sitting on the floor. He put up one hand and found that a lump had grown behind his left ear.

McCosky's expression had not altered, but a leather sap was swinging from his right wrist by its thong. "Get up. We're going downtown."

Falkner turned his body around and pulled himself up to his knees. When he reached his feet his hand was in his pocket, and his voice chipped: "Listen, my fat friend. There's a gun in this pocket. Swing that leather sap again and I'll shoot it out of your fist."

McCosky looked at Falkner's eyes. They were blazing. He stood undecided for an instant, then dropped the sap into his pocket. Falkner glanced at the clock on the wall.

It was already nine. He'd be late for his appointment. There was no time to do anything more to McCosky. He walked him out front and watched him go down the street, then he got a cab.

The old elevator operator put down his love story magazine and started the squeaky car upward. "There's a man waiting to see you. I let him into your office."

Falkner said, "Thanks," left the car at the third floor and started down the dark hall. His office door showed a lighted rectangle through the glass. When he was halfway to it a shot hammered out into the hot stillness, stopping him for an instant. Then he swore in an undertone and pounded forward on hard heels, his gun seeming to leap from his pocket.

He pushed the door inward, counting on the darkness of the hall for a

shield. It wouldn't open more than halfway, and he peered around the edge to find out why.

OLD Pete Durey lay against it, his body huddled as if he'd been trying to get out the door when he fell. Falkner threw a glance around the office. It was empty. The door to his own room was open and so was the window behind his desk. He raced over and peered out.

A big electric sign halfway down the block lighted the fire escape and the roof two stories below. As he looked out, he saw a dim figure jump from the fire escape and zigzag across the roof. He raised his gun and squeezed the trigger, but in his eagerness he overshot and the figure ducked behind the shelter of a chimney.

Falkner waited for him to reappear. He didn't, and Falkner took a chance and went down the fire escape. There was a trapdoor behind the chimney. His man was gone. Falkner climbed back to his office, pausing as he reached the connecting door.

Ellen Burton was bending over Pete Durey's body. She straightened and one hand came up, then she relaxed when she realized who it was.

"Guy."

His voice was roughened by excitement and emotion. "Ellen, what the devil are you doing here?"

She said: "I came up to stop my father—" The words died in her throat.

He was relentless. "To stop your father from doing what?"

She said: "Nothing. I meant to say I came up here to warn you that my father is going to have you arrested on that old charge."

He didn't believe her. He was certain that wasn't what she had started to say, but after a second he turned his attention to Durey's body.

The old man's gun was still in his pocket. He'd never had a chance to use it. That meant that the killer had

already been in the office before Durey entered, or had been crouched by the open window. Durey had seen him and tried too late to escape by the door.

Falkner moved over to the switchboard to call the police. The board was dead. Someone had cut the outgoing line. He swore and tried to fix it, then stopped as the elevator door clanged open and feet came down the hall.

The first into the room was Boyce Greham. He wore the uniform of a motorcycle officer. Falkner stared at him. He'd gone to school with Greham, and they'd never gotten along. The second was McCosky. The fat man was out of breath and very warm. The third was Chief Greham, Boyce's father. Falkner hadn't seen him since his trial seven years ago.

Boyce Greham had stopped and was staring at the girl. "Why are you here, Ellen?"

She hesitated for just a fraction of an instant, then said: "I came up with Guy Falkner."

Young Greham looked disapproving. McCosky stared at her unblinkingly. "The elevator operator didn't say anything about you coming up. He said Falkner came alone."

She flushed. "I—I didn't want the operator to see me. I walked up."

FALKNER studied her a moment, then concentrated his attention on McCosky. He sensed that the fat man was the smartest of the three.

McCosky had been examining Durey. "Why didn't you report this?"

Falkner said: "I tried, but the board wasn't working." He went on to tell them what had happened. He stuck to the truth, but he gave the impression that the girl had been with him all the time. He knew McCosky didn't believe it.

McCosky started to ask her questions, but he didn't get very far. Young Greham cut in. "Lay off her, McCosky. Make him stop, dad."

The chief looked at McCosky warn-

ingly. Falkner's lips twisted, but he wasn't smiling. After ten minutes they let her go, but they took Falkner to the station.

The chief's office was a small square room and it was hot, despite the two electric fans which stirred the sluggish air. The room hadn't changed much since Falkner had been there seven years before. The walls were still painted a dirty yellow and were peeling a little more along the molding.

A couple of reporters lounged in. Falkner didn't know either of them.

Chief Greham said: "When the judge let you off, the understanding was that you would never come back."

Falkner shook his head. "That was the judge's idea. I didn't say anything."

Boyce Greham glared at him from across the room. McCosky was chewing hungrily on a match. The questioning went on, and it wasn't getting anywhere. As long as they thought Ellen Burton had been with him they couldn't accuse him of killing Durey. Anyhow, there wasn't any motive. Why should he kill Durey? After an hour they turned him loose.

As he came down the steps the reporters cornered him. He told them that Sheldon was a swell town, that both the chief and McCosky were fine gentlemen. That got a laugh, and he offered to buy them a drink at Scotty's bar. They accepted and the three of them went down Third Street together.

Scotty was six feet seven in his socked feet. No one had ever seen him wear shoes. He'd been a lumberjack in the old days, but when he got too old to handle an ax he'd come in and opened his bar, ignoring prohibition. He'd been there a long time.

The Sheldon women's clubs referred to him as the "criminal element." He was still black-haired, still straight as one of the trees he had laid low in his youth. He shook Falkner by the hand when they came in.

"Aye, son, and it's a fine thing to

see you. Many's the drink your old man poured me in the old days. Did you come back to make the rats run for cover?"

Falkner said that he hadn't. It warmed him, this welcome; it was the first he'd had in Sheldon. The room was full of dam workers, and Scotty made a sweeping gesture of his hand.

"They're with you, son. They're sore about Pete Durey getting his. Say the word and they'll take this rotten town apart."

Falkner shook his head. "Won't do any good." He finished his drink, waved to the noisy room and then started toward the hotel.

THERE were three men waiting for him as he came into the lobby. Lawrence Cobb came forward, sticking out a big hand. Cobb had been a timber beast once, but he'd quit the woods and with the help of Falkner's father had studied law. He'd been Falkner's attorney, and as such had stuck by Guy through the trouble of seven years ago.

He said: "It's good to see you, boy, but I'm not sure that it's smart for you to be here. They haven't forgotten that old trouble."

Falkner smiled thinly. "Neither have I." His tone was curt, then he smiled. After all, Cobb had been his father's friend, and his. It was Cobb who had talked the judge into letting him off because of his age.

Cobb turned around. "This is Frank Hughes, and Arlend Starr."

Falkner shook hands. He knew who they both were. Hughes was president of the Hughes Land Company, with immense holdings in the San Pasquel Valley. Starr was president of the San Pasquel bank. Both these men were vitally interested in the building of the dam. Without the water it would bring, San Pasquel was dying gradually as its deep wells dried up.

Cobb's big face was grave. "We just heard of Durey's death. It was

quite a blow." His voice was colorless.

Hughes was small, about forty, with quick black eyes and a chiseled smile. The smile was fixed now, his eyes looked worried. "Blow is no name for it. Durey's death means more delay, and the people in the San Pasquel can't stand much more. That dam has to be finished by the time the rains start. If it isn't, half the farmers in the San Pasquel will be ruined."

Falkner said: "Don't worry, that dam's going to be finished if I have to finish it myself."

Starr cleared his throat. He was sixty or sixty-five. He looked like a bank president. His face was too heavy for the rest of him, his eyes unpleasant. "I understand that Carter Burton's daughter was with you when you found Durey's body, and that you and Miss Burton used to be very good friends."

Falkner's mouth tightened. "Do you mean anything by that remark, or are you just talking?"

Cobb stepped forward quickly. "Take it easy, Guy. He didn't mean anything. It's just that we're under a continual strain. I'm attorney for both the bank and the Hughes Land Company, you know. If something happens and the dam isn't finished by this fall, I don't mind telling you that it will ruin us all."

Falkner was unmoved. "Okay, Lawrence, I'll forget it this time. But it's bad enough fighting Burton and his crowd without having your own side sniping at you."

Cobb's voice was hearty. "Don't worry about that. We'll play along and be here when you need us. All you've got to do is to say the word and we'll come running, won't we, Starr?"

The banker grunted ungraciously. Falkner asked: "Who will take over Durey's contract? Find that out for me, will you?"

Cobb nodded. "Sure, anything else?"

Falkner said, "Nothing, except

come running if the cops hop on me. I may need you bad." He watched them go, then turning toward the desk, he sent three telegrams to Los Angeles. When they had been sent, he turned toward the elevator, rode it up to his floor and went down the hall to his room.

CHAPTER III

ELLEN BURTON was sitting in the big chair beside the open window. Falkner looked at her, then he shut the door and tossed his coat onto the bed.

She said: "I bribed the porter to let me in. You don't seem very surprised."

He shook his head. "I'm not." He went across and poured water from the thermos bottle on the night stand. She shook her head when he held out the full glass, and he drained it at a gulp.

"Now," he told her, "let's get down to cases. Just what were you doing in my office tonight? You expected to find your dad there, didn't you? Some way he knew that I was meeting Durey."

She said: "No—"

He crossed and pulled her out of the chair. "Yes!"

They stared at each other. The girl's eyes dropped first. "You're impossible. You've changed."

His voice mocked her, but himself more. "Sure I've changed. This rotten town changed me. It killed my dad. He trusted it and the people in it. He loaned his money because they were his friends, and after he died they accused me of forging their names."

She pulled away. "I see it all now. You came back to get even."

His mouth twisted. "You wouldn't believe me, would you, but I didn't want to come back. I never wanted to see the place again. A man doesn't like to come back to a place he's been made a fool in. I was ordered back,

and when the boss gives an order we snap to obey it."

She said: "But you were sent to protect the dam not to hunt Durey's murderer."

He grimaced. "I was sent to protect a man and his work, and the first thing I know he's shot under my nose. I'm going to get the killers, sister, no matter who they are. Get that—no matter who they are."

She said: "And I came up here to warn you. You haven't got a chance. They're trying to revive that old indictment."

He looked at her, and his smile was a wicked, twisting thing. "Someone's afraid of me, Ellen. That's why they're trying to drive me out, but let them try. I'll be here when the last horn blows, when someone is wearing a piece of rope for a halter."

She shuddered and pulled away from him. As she did so the whole upper pane of the window fell into the room, and a shot made noise through the quiet street.

With a sweeping gesture Falkner's big hand knocked the girl across the bed. She rolled over and went off on the other side. He twisted in the same moment and kicked the stand lamp over, shrouding the room in a darkness which was broken only by the red glow from the neon signs.

He had no gun; the police still held it at the station. But he crept forward toward the window, keeping his big form hunched so that he was below the protection of the sill. He reached the window and peered out.

THERE was an office building across the street, and no light showed from any of the windows. He couldn't be sure exactly where the shot had come from, but he thought from there. Feet hammered along the hall then, and someone was pounding on the door.

Falkner pulled down the shade, masking the broken window, then he crossed the room and opened the door.

The manager was outside—a small man with a bald, egg-shaped head and faint eyebrows that were so light they gave him a hairless appearance.

"What was that? The crash?"

Falkner told him: "Don't get excited, Putner. Just someone shooting at me."

Putner was jittery. "Shooting? Listen, Mr. Falkner. This is a respectable hotel. We can't have such goings on, do you understand? First you are mixed up in a murder and then someone shoots through a window."

Falkner said: "I don't enjoy it any more than you do."

"You'll have to move." Putner was still excited. "You'll have to move."

Falkner nodded. "That's exactly what I intend to do."

The little manager showed his relief. "In that case—"

Falkner said: "In that case you can send up a boy to take my stuff over to one of the rear rooms. They're hotter, but there aren't any three-storied buildings back there to use as shooting galleries."

Putner's mouth opened slowly. "You mean—you think that you're going to stay on at this hotel?"

Falkner told him: "I don't think, I know. Now run along and let me worry about something important."

"But you can't! Do you understand? You can't! I'll send up the house officer. I'll have you thrown out."

Falkner took a step toward him, and he retreated down the hall, still shouting threats. Falkner closed the door. He turned around and said: "You all right?"

From the darkness her voice came shakily: "I guess so."

"Then you'd better get out of here before the big parade arrives. You're too much involved in this thing with me already. Everyone in this town is either going to clip me or throw me out on my ear."

"But, Guy—do you think they were really trying to hit you?"

He said, with a shrug which she couldn't see: "Do you know of any leading citizen who goes around shooting windows out for the fun of it?"

She said slowly and thoughtfully: "I never heard of any."

"Then someone was trying to hit me." The phone rang and he groped through the darkness to find it. His voice was irritable as he said: "What is it now?"

It was McCosky. The fat man was out of breath. "Hello, palo. I just thought I'd call you and tell you that they tested the slug they took out of old Durey. It came from your gun."

Falkner swore softly. "That's impossible. At the time Durey was shot that gun was in my pocket and I was out in the hall. I'm no magician."

McCosky's voice was still tired. "I don't know what you are but those slugs check. There's a milk train at three-thirty. I thought you might like to be on it. We won't arrest you till morning, but this is the last chance."

FALKNER hung up slowly. Reaching over, he turned on the ceiling light.

The girl said: "What was that?"

He told her: "McCosky. They claim that the slug they dug out of Pete Durey came from my gun. That puts us both in a spot. You told them you were with me all the time."

Her face drained of all color. "But surely you didn't kill him—did you, Guy?"

His twisted grin mocked her. "You should know. You were with me all the time."

She caught her lip in her white teeth. "Oh, Guy, why don't you get out of town? They framed you once—"

He swung and caught her shoulders roughly. "Say that again."

She stared at him. "Why—what—"

He said through gritted teeth: "Who framed me? Who had me arrested for forgery? I've been trying

for seven years to find out."

She shook her head quickly, too quickly. "I don't know. It was just what you always said."

His voice was bitter. "And you wouldn't believe me once. I wanted you to go away with me then."

"But, Guy—" She was trying to reason with him. This big shaggy man frightened her. He wasn't the meek scared boy she had known. "We were both so young. What did we know of life? What chance had we?"

He let her go, and there was disappointment in his face which he masked well. "Forget it and get out of here before your reputation is shot. I'm not going. I ran once, but this time I fight. And when I get through, they can pick up the pieces if there are any pieces left."

"But what can you do?"

He was grim. "I didn't fire that shot. Someone got to the ballistics expert and switched bullets. I'm going to see that he talks. Now get out."

She moved toward the door, but before she reached it there was a knock. A quick glance shot between them, then Falkner passed her and pulled the door open.

Outside, a man almost as big as Falkner himself was shifting from one foot to the other a little smile on his twisted Irish face. Falkner recognized the hotel detective and his face muscles tightened.

"Hello, Shay."

Shay said: "I got orders to evacuate you."

Falkner shrugged. "You'll save yourself trouble by not trying to carry them out."

Shay's eyes took in the girl for one fleeting second, then switched back to Falkner. "That's what I figured. Come on, I'll help you carry your bags. Three-ten is vacant, and you'd better keep the key in your pocket. The less people that know where you are parked, the less chance there'll be that your room will be searched."

They shifted the bags and then started back down the hall. Falkner looked around for the girl, but there was no sign of her. Ellen Burton had vanished. Shay left Falkner at the stairs and he rode the elevator down alone.

THE police station looked bleak and deserted when Falkner turned into the entrance. McCosky wasn't there; neither was the chief. Falkner asked a sleepy sergeant who the ballistics man was, and the sergeant told him the name was Grover and that he'd gone home. A five dollar bill got the man's address.

Falkner went out and found a cab at the corner. He gave the driver Grover's address and climbed in. They went out through the deserted streets past a lone milk truck, and turned south on Brand Boulevard. From across the canyon came the sound of blasting. Evidently Durey's death hadn't stopped the working of the night crew.

The house was small and neat, a one-storied frame affair with flower boxes and green shutters. Falkner went up the three steps to the little portico and punched the bell. He punched it several times before a light came on in the hall and a woman in a faded crimson wrapper opened the door a crack and surveyed him.

"What's the matter?"

Falkner told her: "It's very important. I want to see Sergeant Grover on official business."

She sniffed. "I don't know what this town is coming to. Ever since they sent Alf away to take that fool course in bullets, they've been waking him up in the middle of the night. Well, he's back in his shop. He ain't come to bed yet. The shop's around behind the garage." She shut the door.

Guy followed the narrow cement walk around the house. The rear lawn was square and hedge-lined. To the right at the end of the drive was a garage. Behind it was a shedlike af-

fair with a light showing from two small windows.

Falkner went around to the door and knocked. Nothing happened. The door had a hasp and a padlock, but the hasp wasn't closed and Falkner pushed gently on the door. It swung inward, and he could see a man seated at a bench on the far side of the little laboratory. His back was to the door and his head forward on his hands.

Falkner called, got no answer and stepped in. He called louder this time, thinking the man had gone to sleep at his work. Then something in the man's position aroused Guy's suspicion. He went forward quickly, swearing beneath his breath.

The ballistics man's head was pillowed on the crossed arms and the coat sleeves of both were soaked with blood. Falkner stooped and made a quick examination without touching the body. There was a gun fastened in a vise, as if Grover had been lining it up. Falkner got his nose down close to the gun, and the odor of burnt cordite was quite noticeable.

A sound from behind made him swing around. The woman in the crimson wrapper was standing in the open doorway staring with widening eyes. Her mouth opened, and Falkner had the flashing thought that she had forgotten her false teeth. Then she closed her mouth very slowly and the normality of her tone shocked Falkner.

"Is he dead?"

Guy nodded soberly. "Yes."

She didn't cry; she didn't do anything which Falkner expected her to do under the circumstances. She just walked into the room and looked down at the dead Grover.

THEN she said in the same toneless voice: "I've been expecting it. I told him he was a fool to go playing with guns. Guns ain't made to play with."

Falkner said: "I don't think this was an accident, Mrs. Grover."

Her eyes jerked up to meet his, and

she showed her first emotion. It was surprise. "Not an accident?"

He said, still speaking soberly: "I don't think so. Someone tried to make it look like one, but they didn't do a very good job. Would you know anyone who would have reason to kill your husband?"

She said: "No one but me."

He caught his breath. "You—"

She said: "I didn't kill him, but sometimes I was mad enough to. No, I don't know anyone who would want to kill him, unless it would be the man he talked to on the phone."

Falkner's voice tightened. "Who was that?"

She shrugged. "I don't know. I heard Alf come in about an hour ago. I pretended to be asleep. He walked around the front room for a while muttering to himself then he went over to the phone and called a number."

"What number?" Falkner didn't try to hide his eagerness.

She said, disappointingly: "He dialed it. Anyhow he got someone. I heard him say, 'I feel like a heel. I can't go through with it.' Then he was silent for a while, and afterward he said, 'No, not for a thousand dollars. I'm going to give them the real bullet in the morning and tell the whole business.'"

"And that's all he said." Falkner couldn't disguise his disappointment.

The woman nodded. "That was all."

Falkner looked around quickly. "Where did he usually keep the bullets he was working on?"

She pointed to a small drawerlike arrangement in the corner. Inside there were three bullets; two of them were tagged. Falkner examined the tags and they bore no relation to this business. The third one had no tag at all, and he picked it up. "Funny you didn't hear the shot."

"But I did." The woman still showed no sign of grief. "I heard it, but I didn't think anything about it. Alf was always firing into his sand-

box. The neighbors have all gotten used to it."

He nodded. "You'd better call the police now, Mrs. Grover. I'm sorry about your husband."

She said: "It's all right. He carried ten thousand in insurance. I'll get along okay." Turning, she left the shed.

Falkner did not wait for the police. He'd had enough trouble with them for one night. Instead, he took his cab back to Scotty's bar and walked in to find the place pretty well deserted, and the tall Scot about ready to close.

Scotty set out a bottle of whisky and nodded. "I thought you'd gone home to bed."

Falkner told him: "That's what I thought. Where would you go around here if you didn't want the cops to get their hands on you?"

The old man looked at him for a long moment. "I think I'd go over to the dam. I don't think the cops would bother you there tonight."

Falkner said: "Thanks, I'm headed there. I hope you sleep well."

CHAPTER IV

IT WAS well along in the afternoon of the next day before Falkner walked into the lobby of his hotel, and, crossing to the desk, inquired for mail. There were three telegrams in answer to the ones he had sent. He pocketed them and crossed the lobby to the row of phone booths.

He was completely aware of the two men who watched his movements from behind a screen of palm trees in the corner. But he gave no indication that he had seen them. He dropped his nickel and asked for Frank Hughes when he got his connection.

The president of the land company answered almost at once, and Guy said: "This is Falkner. I'm over at my hotel, and a couple of plain-clothes men have me cornered in the lobby. You said last night that you would help."

Hughes got excited. "What do you want done?"

Faulkner told him: "Get a lawyer and go around to the police station. Unless I'm very wrong I'm going to be arrested for murder as soon as I step out of this booth." He hung up, folded the doors back and stepped out.

He wasn't wrong in his deductions. The two men were closing down at him from converging angles, which would cut off any possibility of escape. He attempted none.

From the corner of his eye he could see the big house dick, Shay, watching proceedings from the desk. Guy raised his hand in salute and saw Shay make a warning gesture. Shay was okay. Falkner decided then that if he could ever give the big Irishman a break he would.

One of the plain-clothes men was at his elbow. "We want you, Falkner."

Guy didn't argue. "I've been expecting you to close in for the last five minutes."

The taller one looked at him narrowly. "Oh, a wise guy." He doubled up one fist and couldn't quite make out whether he wanted to use it or not. He patted over Falkner's pockets, was chagrined when he failed to find a gun, and jerked his head toward the door.

They went out to a department car parked across the street. It took them down Third fast and across town, swinging into the arched driveway and back beside the police station. When Falkner got out he saw McCosky standing in the door looking at him.

The fat man did not move, just stood there, and his little eyes were smaller than ever. As Falkner got closer he read hate in their depths. It surprised him. It was the first emotion the fat man had exhibited.

Guy said: "How's the diet?"

McCosky turned on him and snarled: "Cop killer!" He hit Falkner a stunning blow in the eye. De-

spite his weight, McCosky was fast, and there was a lot of power behind the blow. It drove the detective sideways against the brick wall of the building, and McCosky charged him, swinging again.

But this time Falkner moved his head, and McCosky struck the wall with all his force. The pain from his hand dragged all the color from his flabby cheeks, and sudden beads of perspiration laced his forehead.

FALKNER had leaped sideways, his hands up, ready to strike. But he saw McCosky sway, and for an instant he thought that the fat man was going to fall, and Guy caught him.

McCosky shook loose violently, swearing. "Take your hands off me, you rat. I give you warning and tell you that we've got the bullet so that you can cram. And then you kill Alf Grover. I'll take your heart out and nail it to a pole."

Falkner said sharply, "Hold it. I didn't kill Grover," but the fat man was past hearing.

He made another lumbering swing, this time with his left hand. His right hung at his side useless. Falkner avoided the blow with ease, grabbed the man's wrist in both hands and swung him around.

"Stop it, or I'll—" Something hit the back of Guy's head and he dropped to the concrete platform. The blow didn't put him out, and he twisted. One of the plain-clothes men was standing over him with a sap in his hand.

"Try to escape, will you?"

Rage was like a fountain, boiling up through Falkner, but he stayed where he was. He didn't have a chance with this gang and he knew it.

The plain-clothes man sneered down at him. "Yellow, huh? You can dish it out, but you can't take it."

From the doorway the chief said harshly: "What's going on out here?"

The plain-clothes man said: "This rat tried to escape. I had to clip him."

The chief didn't seem to mind. There was a thin smile on his tight lips. "Pick him up and bring him in here. We'll give him a real reason to escape."

Two men in uniform had been standing on the other side of the squad car watching things. They came around it and stooped to pick up Falkner. One of them sunk a short right in his ribs, which made Guy grunt. Then they stood him on his feet.

His legs acted like rubber, bending at the wrong places. He didn't know whether he could stand alone or not, and he made no effort to try. The ring on McCosky's finger had cut him above the eye. He hadn't been conscious of it before, but now blood began to trickle down and obscure his sight. His head felt as if it had been split open by an ax, and his side hurt.

They carried him into the chief's office and shoved him into a chair. The two newspaper reporters for whom he had bought a drink came in. They didn't look pleased, but they didn't say anything. A young fellow from the D. A.'s office showed up, then a couple of men from the Chamber of Commerce came in with Burton.

Falkner watched them sullenly. All three had been friends of his father, and there had been notes, signed by all three, in his father's safety deposit box. He knew that he could look for help from none of them.

MCCOSKY was standing against the wall nursing his bruised hand. The two plain-clothes men who had brought him in were behind his chair, and Boyce Greham, still in his motorcycle uniform, was on his father's right. It looked like a star chamber if Falkner ever saw one. Then there was a disturbance in the hall, and Frank Hughes shoved his way past the protesting guard. Lawrence Cobb was at his heels. Hughes swept the room with angry eyes. Cobb crossed to Falkner's side.

"Guy, what have they done to you?"

Why didn't you call me directly?"

Falkner managed a smile. "I thought Burton would bring you, but I hated to call you. You stood by me once and got yourself in bad."

Cobb made a sweeping gesture. "To hell with that." He swung around to face the chief. "What's the idea of beating Falkner up?"

The chief winked at McCosky. "He tried to escape."

Cobb's lips were tight. "We'll see what the governor has to say about this, Greham. I warn you that he's been watching conditions in Sheldon for a long time. If you can't carry out your office in a more orderly fashion, we'll see what the national guard can do."

Greham's voice was suddenly cold, deadly. "Listen, Mr. Cobb. We don't need you to tell us our business. This man is a criminal. You defended him once in our courts, seven years ago. He came back, after promising to leave the state and never return. We gave him every advantage, remembering that his father once was a respected citizen. But he repaid us by killing one of our men last night."

Cobb hesitated and looked toward Falkner. "What about it, Guy?"

Falkner's voice lacked emotion. "He's telling it. The trouble is, Lawrence, someone in this town is scared of me. They've had the knife out for me ever since I got back. Seven years ago, I expected to live here the rest of my life. I only wanted what was mine, but they accused me of theft. They kicked me out of this part of the country. When I came back, it was like a ghost rising. They had to get me out of town."

Cobb was inflexible. "Did you kill this Grover?"

"No, his wife heard the shot which killed him. It was before I got there, not afterward."

McCosky swore. "You can't believe her. She's been hoping to collect Alf's insurance for years."

Hughes spoke for the first time. "But who killed Durey?"

Falkner shrugged. "The whole thing hinges on the dam," he said, as if he were speaking aloud. "You want it built, a lot of people don't. Anything which can delay the work is their idea. Durey's death was supposed to delay it, but that wasn't why he was killed. He was killed because he'd learned suddenly who was behind the sabotage and was going to tell me. Grover was killed because he'd been bribed to switch the murder bullet for one which he had fired from my gun."

"Now the funny part of the whole business is that the man who's been trying to block the dam has overlooked an easy way to do it. They're driving those diversion tunnels through Sun Mountain and they're having trouble. The mountain is capped by volcanic rock, but underneath is a kind of clay. The clay is loaded with moisture and is harder to dig through than the rock because they can't hold their bore."

"The minute they dig a hole, it swells, pushes through the timbers and fills their drifts. They can't hold it, no matter how much timbering they do because the whole thing shifts. There's nothing solid to anchor the timbers to."

"So Pete Durey took a leaf out of the book. He'd heard that up at Bonneville Dam they had a bank that wouldn't stand. Up there they tried everything and finally they ran refrigeration pipes into the dirt and froze the bank solid."

"That's what Durey did in the tunnels. He ran in pipes and froze the clay, holding it there until he could pour the concrete linings. Once they get the concrete in, it will be anchored on hard rock at both ends and will serve as a bridge through the mountain's clay center. All anyone has to do to really jam the works is to wreck the refrigeration plant."

THERE was silence in the room for a full minute, then Hughes swung around angrily. "Durey told

you that in confidence. Why are you telling it here, telling the dam's enemies how to wreck the works?"

Falkner's voice was savage. "I'm just protecting myself, Hughes. I'm showing that if I were really trying to stop the work, I could have stopped it without killing Durey."

Hughes was raging. "I don't like you, Falkner. I think that you're a double-dealing rat. You've betrayed a trust, a dead man's trust. We're in the wrong place, Cobb. Come on, let's get out and let them hang him."

Lawrence Cobb hesitated. "Guy, you shouldn't have done that."

Falkner flared. "I'm tired of taking raps, tired of getting pushed around. If you don't like what I did, get out."

Cobb hesitated a moment longer, then with a shrug he followed Hughes from the room. McCosky laughed, and there was a twisting anger in the sound. "You've fixed yourself now, sonny boy. You've double-crossed so many people that you don't know who is on your side and who isn't. Let me take him downstairs, chief. I'll have a confession in ten minutes."

Greham's face was tight. "We'll get it up here, Mac, and it won't take ten minutes—" He broke off as a red-faced sergeant hurried into the room.

"Hey, chief, the street is full of those roughnecks from the dam. They say that if we don't turn Falkner loose they'll tear this building down and then wreck the rest of the town."

Greham swore. "Get the riot guns and the tear gas. We'll show them how we treat a mob."

"Too late." Scotty had come in through the door behind the sergeant. He still wore no shoes, but he towered above every man in the room. Behind him were a dozen tunnel workers, still wearing their crash helmets and looking for all the world like soldiers.

Falkner laughed and started to get to his feet. One of the plain-clothes men moved forward to stop him, only to be grabbed by a couple of tunnel workers.

"Sit down, boy scout."

The plain-clothes man sat down hurriedly, Burton came up to his feet. His face was white with rage. "Do you men realize what you're doing? Do you realize that you can all go to prison?" Someone shoved him back into his seat. The men were disarming the police. Falkner walked out in the lead to find the street filled with men from the dam.

They made quite a parade marching down First, singing. The people of Sheldon gathered on the sidewalks to watch, and there were quite a few cheers. It was obvious that not everyone in town agreed with the Chamber of Commerce.

Falkner was walking beside Scotty. "You shouldn't have showed up there," he told the ex-lumberjack. "It's okay for most of these boys. They're on the job across the canyon, and they can't touch them, but you're in business in this town."

The tall man grinned. "I was," he said. "But I been getting ready to retire and I figured this was as good a time as any."

Falkner didn't say anything. He'd just got out of a tough spot and no one knew it better than he. But he wasn't out of the woods yet. After all, bad as he was, Chief Greham still represented the law in Sheldon and the state wasn't going to overlook this action. It couldn't.

Scotty said: "We'd better get out of town as soon as we can." He was evidently thinking the same thing. "They ain't going to forget this in a hurry. The place will be lousy with militia in the morning. Come on, let's ride."

CHAPTER V

THE sun had been down behind the distant peaks for better than two hours when Falkner came out of the field office. Below them, the strings of lights brightened the canyon as the workers drove on. Durey's men were carrying forward as if their boss were still alive.

Falkner turned and moved up the grade with Scotty at his heels. A guard challenged them and they answered in muffled tones. Below, the roar from the gravel washer and the constant pound of the air drills made a steady beat which almost drowned their words.

They climbed on up the brush-lined slope, and suddenly Falkner's quick ears caught sound which jerked him to a stop. A rock had rattled by them on the trail. That might mean nothing or it might mean that someone was coming down the grade toward them.

Both he and Scotty stepped off the trail and crouched in the shadow of the brush. Someone was coming, there could be no mistake about that now.

Above them the sky was black with the threat of an approaching storm. It was impossible to see more than a dozen feet in the reflection of the lights from the canyon below.

In this reflection they saw a figure suddenly, indistinct, vague, as it moved forward. Falkner took no chances. He waited until the newcomer was almost directly opposite, then he jumped forward and jammed his gun against the shadow's side.

Her startled exclamation was the first warning that his prisoner was a girl.

"Ellen!"

Her breath caught in her throat. "Guy, I was afraid that I wouldn't find you."

His tone was rougher than he intended. "What are you doing, wandering around at night? Don't you know that we have guards, that you might have been shot?"

She said: "I tried to telephone you, but there was no answer."

"We cut the telephone lines," he told her. "We didn't want anyone to be able to get word to the dam until our work was finished."

She said: "But I had to warn you. They've got a posse together and brought police in from two other counties. They're going to move

against you in the early morning. You've got to get out of the state, Guy, out of the country. This time there won't be any chance of letting you off."

He said grimly: "Thanks, you took a chance, coming here. Why?"

"Does it matter?"

He told her: "It matters a lot, Ellen. It matters more to me than this dam—than anything I can name."

She said: "I had to come."

He was holding her shoulders. "Because you know that I'm innocent, that I'm being framed."

He couldn't see her clearly enough to be sure, but he thought that she shook her head. "I don't seem to care about that, Guy. All that's important is for you to get away."

He laughed suddenly in the darkness and Scotty seized his arm. "Fool. Stop it."

The laugh died, but Falkner was still chuckling. "Then we win, Ellen. Nothing else matters. Listen, you'll have to come on with us. There're guards on the trail below, and I don't dare let you go back to town."

"But where are you heading?"

He told her: "Never mind. Just keep close to me, and when I give the word, drop down into the brush and stay there. He took her arm and guided her as best he could along the trail.

AN EIGHTH of a mile above they turned off the trail to the right and wound through the brush, following a narrow path which was little more than a trace. After fifteen minutes a building loomed suddenly out of the darkness and the girl caught her breath.

"The refrigerating plant."

"Sh-h-h," Scotty warned her.

Her fingers tightened on Falkner's arm. "What are you going to do?"

Falkner told her. "Just stay here and keep quiet."

She didn't release her grip on his arm. "Father told me what you said

at the police station. You're not going to wreck the plant, are you?"

He sounded a little bitter. "And I thought you trusted me."

There was a sudden catch in her voice. "Guy, why is it that we always seem to be fighting each other? Go ahead. I don't care what you do. Wreck the plant, kill a thousand men. But no matter what you do, I'm still for you."

He leaned over in the darkness and kissed her suddenly. "Good girl. Just stay here, and don't make any noise."

Obediently she waited in the shadow of the brush. It seemed hours that she waited there in the darkness with only the distant sound from the canyon to break the stillness.

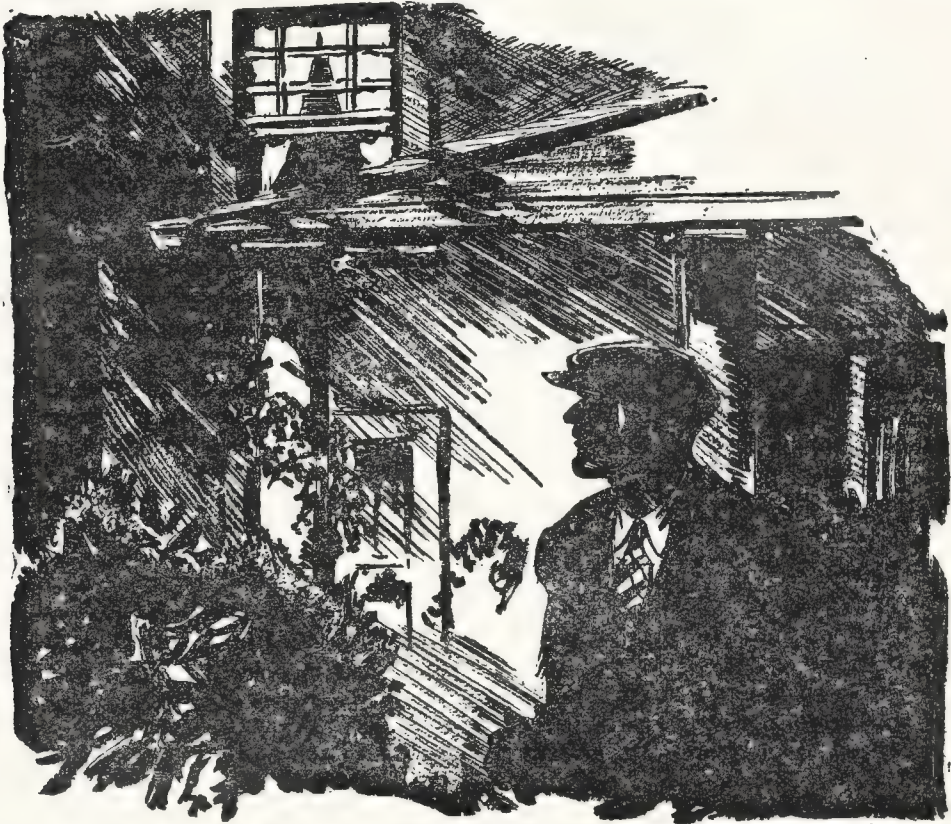
Suddenly she saw a shadow moving forward past her toward the plant door. She watched it with frozen hor-

ror, wondering what she should do, whether she should call out, to warn the men inside.

And then it was too late, for the shadow had reached the door and was pushing it open. Some force, stronger than reason brought her to her feet and forced her forward. She didn't want to go. She knew that she should stay there, but she couldn't help herself.

She reached the door and pushed it open. A man was bending above the big motor in the center of the plant. She could see the box that he carried and instinctively she knew what it was. She screamed. She hadn't meant to. She hadn't meant to open her mouth, but the scream came.

The man beside the motor straightened and there was a gun in his hand. He swung around and leaped toward her. She tried to back out through the



door, but her heel caught and she fell heavily against the jamb.

The next moment the man was jerking her to her feet. And she stared up into the face of Lawrence Cobb, the water company attorney.

He was as surprised as she. "Ellen Burton. What the devil are you doing here?"

She stared at him, not understanding. Her brain refused to grasp the fact that he was here, that he had been bending over the machinery, about to plant a bomb.

He was laughing now. "This is swell. I hate to do it, but it will make the setup perfect. I'll have to knock you out, sweetheart, then plant the bomb. When it goes off, they'll find your body and think your dad was behind the blowing up of the plant."

She said: "But you—I don't understand."

"No one does," he told her. "Close your eyes while I sock you. It will be over in a minute."

The hand which held his weapon went up, and a gun exploded in the confines of the building. For an instant the girl thought that Cobb had squeezed the trigger accidentally, then she realized that Cobb had dropped his gun and grabbed his wrist.

FALKNER and Scotty had jumped forward across the room, and there was a smoking gun in Falkner's hand. He seized Cobb as the man started to run and threw him to the floor. Scotty knelt on the man, pinning him to the concrete.

Falkner turned to the girl. "All right, honey?"

She nodded uncertainly. Things were happening a little too fast for her.

He said: "You darn fool. Why didn't you stay out in the brush like I told you? You might have been killed."

She was vague. "I saw him come in. I didn't know what to do. I thought

that you were wrecking the plant and I had to warn you."

He stared at her. "You thought I was wrecking—you actually thought that and yet you came to warn me?"

Her face was suddenly flushed. "I told you, Guy Falkner, that anything you did was all right with me. I'm sorry if I butted in at the wrong time, sorry if I spoiled your plan."

He was ober. "In reality you helped. We didn't know how to get him away from that bomb without shooting to kill, and I didn't want to kill him." He turned his head. "All right, boys, bring them out."

From the far end of the plant half a dozen husky tunnel workers shoved two bound men forward. There was tape across their lips, but their eyes were unbandaged. The girl recognized McCosky and the police chief.

Falkner gave an order and the men's arms were freed, the tape removed.

"Both of you are too pig-headed to see beyond your noses so we had to drag you over here to see us catch your killer."

He turned to the girl. "We knew before I ever came up here that whoever was sabotaging the work didn't want water to reach the San Pasquel Valley. On the face of it, it looked like the work of your father and his Chamber of Commerce commission.

"But no matter what was done, the dam would be finished sooner or later. So we had to look for someone who didn't want water to reach the San Pasquel this next summer. That person would be the San Pasquel bank, since they had loaned a lot of money to the valley farmers. The loans were coming due at the end of the next harvest. So we suspected Starr and investigated his bank. But in doing so, we learned that Starr was just a front, that Cobb owned the bank. That he had bought it, seven years ago."

"Seven years?" She looked at him questioningly.

He nodded. "Cobb put a hundred and thirty thousand into that bank seven years ago. Now it was a strange coincidence that a hundred and thirty thousand is just the amount that was the face value of those forged notes which were found in my safety deposit box."

She said: "You mean that Cobb took the money from your father's estate, forged those notes himself and put them in the box? Then when you tried to collect on them and were arrested, he defended you?" the girl persisted.

Falkner nodded. "It looks that way, but we had no proof."

The man on the floor twisted. "You haven't now."

Falkner looked toward the bomb. "That's no child's toy you brought in here," he pointed out. "I tripped you, Cobb, telling about the refrigeration plant. I knew that if our suspicions were correct, you'd try and wreck it. But that isn't all. I've got the bullet which actually killed Durey. You

thought he'd destroyed it, but he hadn't. Mrs. Grover saw me get it. She'll swear where it came from and I think it will fit your gun."

He turned back to the girl. "Ever since I got back, Cobb has been trying either to kill me or get me out of town. He sensed that as long as I was in the country, there was a chance of reopening the old case. But he failed. There'll be water in the San Pasquel before spring, the farmers will make a crop next season and won't lose their land."

She said: "And you? I'll make my father clear you of the old charge. You can come back to Sheldon and have everything you wish."

He shook his head. "To the devil with Sheldon. I've got everything from that town that I ever want. Come on, we'll go over and get your things. If we drive all night we can be married in San Francisco in the morning."

She smiled, and that was all the answer he needed.

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Framed for a Funeral

By H. Q. Masur



SHE breezed into the cocktail lounge and a dozen heads craned for a better view. You read about glamour girls, but you never know what the term means till you've seen one. Poise, beauty, an aloofness, yes, but more important is that certain indefinable quality certain girls have that make a fellow feel no bigger than a pinhead. She had it, plus.

She perched herself on a red

leather and chromium stool beside the cowboy and ordered a drink. This wasn't any ordinary cowboy. He was wearing quite an outfit. Ten-gallon pearl gray Stetson, green silk shirt, doeskin chaps. You don't see a rig like that except in the movies or in Reno or in Las Vegas—which is where we were.

Dude ranch stuff. Strictly for the tourists.

Besides being slightly crooked he was one of those pretty boys, with wavy blond hair, the kind prospective

Being bodyguard to a glamour girl bride brought Detective Bill Hawke to a strange reunion in a Las Vegas hotel. For the girl's groom was Bill's best friend—and the groom was on the spot because he neglected to register a corpse guest.

divorcees like to mother. He said something to the girl and she didn't like it.

Smiling sweetly, she picked up her drink, held the rim of the glass to her lips. Then suddenly she tossed the whole mess, ice, orange slice and cherry, right smack into his grinning face.

That was the end of the grin. It vanished like a trick pigeon. You could see anger in his eyes, boiling up inside him, getting ready to explode. Somebody laughed and color flushed his cheeks. That made him try the cave-man act which was a big mistake. He made a quick grab, got his arms around the girl and kissed her.

He was a big lad and she couldn't squirm away. I slid off my stool and sauntered over. I tapped him on the shoulder and when he loosened his grip, twisted him away. He let out a bellow and swung. I stepped inside and let him have it. Seeing as he made his living out of that pretty face I gave it to him in the stomach. He turned green and doubled over to the floor.

I fixed my tie knot, pinned a smile to my face and turned to receive an accolade. All I got was startled surprise. The girl was gone, nowhere to be seen.

Two waiters rushed over, each one grabbed an ankle, and the cowboy went sliding across the floor and out into the street.

I climbed back on my stool and ordered another drink. I felt fine. This job might turn out to be very nice indeed. I hadn't wanted to leave Los Angeles. I hadn't wanted to go to Las Vegas, but a fee is a fee, and a thousand dollars makes a very tempting retainer.

When I finished my drink I reached for my wallet and got out a picture of

a girl. It was only a snapshot, but it was a very revealing one and mighty pleasant on the eyes. The girl was in a bathing suit, by the side of a swimming pool. The picture didn't show it, but her hair was burnished bronze, her eyes a deep cobalt and her figure something to catch your breath.

It was a picture of the little package I had just rescued, and as tasty a dish as you're likely to see in a town that's loaded with them.

Her name was Carla Parkhurst. Her old man was in the lumber business, important stuff, and what he wanted to know was what his only daughter and heiress was doing in Las Vegas. Which is why I was there. And also to see that she didn't get into any trouble.

My original plan had simply been to tail her. Now that the cowboy had given me an opening I thought maybe I'd make a play for her and get into her confidence. It had been a piece of luck and luck often comes in chunks. The bartender came along then and laid something down in front of my glass.

It was a frilly piece of lace with the initials C.P. embroidered in a corner. I supposed it to be a handkerchief, though it wasn't much good for what handkerchiefs are supposed to be used for.

The bartender grinned. "The lady left it."

I slapped an extra half dollar on the bar for him and lifted the lace to my nose. It left me a little weak. Twenty dollars a gram, the kind of perfume they put in handblown bottles and handle with reverence like a first edition of the Bible.

The cocktail lounge is part of the Palm Plaza Hotel. The Palm Plaza is Las Vegas's newest and most exclusive hostelry. A room and bath for a

sum only a little smaller than what the government is trying to raise for national defense.

I crossed to the desk and stood behind a new arrival and waited for the clerk to finish registering him. I wanted Carla Parkhurst's room number. When I returned the handkerchief she'd have to thank me for it, and for the rescue, and that would make us good friends—I hoped.

Then this new guest turned around and I almost fell through to the basement.

His face lighted like a Klieg lamp, he grabbed my hand, started pumping it. He walloped me on the shoulder.

"Bill Hawke!" he yelled. "Gumshoe Bill, the private dick."

It was Tom Grove, a former roommate of mine at the U.S.C. In the old days I had run interference for him and he'd built up a nice football rep. I hadn't seen him in some time and naturally this reunion called for a drink.

We went back to the bar and tossed off a couple. "Well, Tom," I asked, "what are you doing in Las Vegas?"

"Business," he said. "Selling building supplies."

"Fine. Have dinner with me."

He shook his head. "Sorry, Bill, I can't. But I'll see you later. I've got some news for you."

WE JAWED about this and that for a while, then Tom left. I sat at the bar reminiscing by myself. Since it was so close to dinner I thought I'd wait till Carla Parkhurst came down and then I'd return the handkerchief.

I got through a good meal and two cups of coffee and she never showed up. So along about nine o'clock I tried to house phone, but couldn't raise an answer. That didn't bother me. Maybe somebody had dated her and taken her elsewhere to dine.

I got her room number from the bell captain and rode up. Casing the place might give me some clue as to what she was doing in Las Vegas. I still

had that thousand buck retainer to earn and I'd promised old man Parkhurst to give him daily reports.

The passkey was something I'd taken from a dead con and so far it had never failed me. It was worth twenty times its weight in gold and had let me into places a can of nitroglycerin couldn't have opened.

A quick glance up and down the hall showed it empty. I inserted the key, twisted it, heard the satisfying click of dropping bolts, pushed the door open and entered.

The first shock I got was from the brightly burning lights. The second was from the two people in the room.

Carla Parkhurst had whirled and was staring at me with wide, terror-stricken eyes. The color had faded from her face and the poise I'd noticed earlier had fallen like a discarded mantle. The other person was a stranger.

He was staring at the ceiling and he was going to keep on staring at the ceiling until somebody closed his eyes. Then they would stay closed for good. The bullet hole had entered through the back of his skull and emerged just above the left eyebrow. He was as dead as he would ever get.

I kicked the door shut behind me and turned back to Carla Parkhurst. I reached her in one long jump and clamped my hand over her open mouth, just in time to stifle a scream.

"Behave yourself," I said. "You want the whole hotel up here?"

She gulped and I let her go. "You're—you're—"

"Yeah," I snapped. "I'm the guy who pulled you out of a little jam this afternoon, but sister, this is a beaut. Who is he?"

She just stood there, watching me, and I could tell from the way the cords in her throat stood out that she was practically paralyzed.

"Look," I said, "my name is Hawke, William Hawke. Your father hired me to keep an eye on you. He must be psychic. I can understand now why he

laid a big retainer on the line. He must have known you were dynamite."

The breath left her in a sharp exhalation and she relaxed, not much, but enough to talk.

She said swiftly: "Listen, I didn't kill him. I found him, like this, dead."

"You know who he is?"

She nodded.

"Give," I said.

"His name is Diehl. He's my father's bookkeeper."

"When did you find him?"

"A few minutes ago, just before you opened my door."

I looked up at the electric light, changed my position, crouched a little and examined the corpse from a different angle.

"Don't lie to me," I told her, "or you'll end up in the gas chamber."

She bit her wrist. "I—I don't understand."

I TRACED a line from the dead man's heels toward a connecting door. "Look. See the way the nap of the rug is scuffed. He's been dragged through that door from the other room. Who's in there?"

"Nobody." She bit it out too quickly. "You must be mistaken."

I walked over to the door, but before I could reach it, she had rushed in front of me, her eyes frantic, blocking my path. She plucked at my coat and said desperately:

"Please, believe me. He was killed in here. Don't go into that room. You've got to—"

I thrust her to one side gently and grabbed the doorknob. I didn't get a chance to pull the door open because it opened in my face. I stood planted solidly on both feet and let out a whistle.

"Tom!" I exclaimed.

His eyes were like two pools of flame. He glared at me, his jaw muscles bunched whitely.

"What are you doing here?" he demanded.

"I just walked in," I told him, "to check up on Miss Parkhurst. Seeing

it's you, Tom, I'm not acting wise about my answers. I'm working for her father."

"Spying," he growled.

"Doing a job."

"All right, you've seen enough. Get out."

I said quietly: "You're scared, Tom, or you wouldn't talk like that. You're in trouble and people in trouble are my racket. I'm going to help you for two reasons. You're an old friend, and I've already been paid by old man Parkhurst."

Slowly, the fire in Tom's eyes simmered, then died. He loosened, relaxed, and the ghost of a smile appeared on his mouth.

"Sorry, Bill. This is such a hell of a mess I don't know what I'm saying."

"Good. Now let's get to business. What's this room next door?"

"That's my room. I had the one next to Carla's reserved."

"Why?"

"Because—" He glanced at her and she nodded. "You see," he continued, "I've known Carla about four months. I work for her dad. We've been seeing a lot of each other, secretly. We were married a couple of days ago, but we were afraid to break the news. This was to be sort of a business trip and honeymoon combined."

I didn't bother offering congratulations. I jerked my thumb at the corpse.

"This fellow, Diehl, he was killed in your room then?"

"Yes."

"What was he doing in there?"

"I don't know, Bill."

"Didn't you let him in?"

"No."

"Where were you?"

"I was in here with Carla. The connecting door was closed."

"Did you hear the shot?" I asked.

Tom shook his head. "That's what's so puzzling. We didn't hear a thing. I just walked into my room and there he was on the floor."

I chewed on that for a minute. "The gun may have had a silencer. That's

not important. What is important is what he was doing in there. Have you any idea?"

"None."

"Try guessing."

Tom hunched his shoulders in a helpless gesture. "I can't."

"Then you'd better start and pretty damn fast. This is murder. You can't keep this guy a secret. If the cops don't find him, the chambermaid will. You can't keep her out of here forever. Cops are curious people. They'll ask questions, Tom, lots of them, and you'd better be prepared to answer them."

"But I don't know a thing," Tom cried.

"Good Lord, man! What kind of an answer is that? The guy is found dead and you say you don't know a thing about him, dead in your room."

"Well, that's the way it is," Tom answered angrily. "Take it or leave it."

I turned to Carla. "You heard everything he said. Is it true?"

Twin spots of color showed in her cheeks. "You don't think Tom killed him, do you?"

"I don't know anything," I said. "My job is to protect you, and besides that I want to help Tom."

"Listen," he said earnestly. "I didn't kill Diehl. I swear it. You know my word is good, Bill."

"All right, then answer this. Why did you drag him from your room into Carla's?"

TOM brushed his hand nervously, through his hair. "Because the windows in my room look out on the street. The windows in here look down into a courtway. We were going to wait until it was dark enough, then dump the body out. We thought it wouldn't be discovered for a while and in the meantime we'd leave, then they wouldn't connect us with it."

I started cursing. "That was bright, very bright. What do you think cops are—nitwits? They're smart. They're smart as hell. You know the first thing

they'd do? They'd learn that Diehl worked for a man named Parkhurst. Then they'd find out that Parkhurst's daughter was registered in this hotel, that her room looked out on the courtway into which the body had been dumped. They'd go after her. They'd break her down. They've got ways of doing that.

"She'd let something slip and the first thing you know you'd be indicted for first degree murder. And they'd make it stick too. Getting rid of a dead body. What the hell do you think a human corpse is? A piece of garbage you can toss out of a window like from an East Side tenement."

After that outburst I stopped to catch my breath. Carla looked altogether miserable and Tom Grove's head was hanging. I was happy at least to see that he was ashamed of himself, that at last I'd made some impression on the big fathead.

He said in a pleading voice: "You've got to help me, Bill."

"All right, but you won't answer any questions. What do you want me to do?"

He was silent for a minute, swallowing, his throat working, and then he held out his hands and I could see how badly the fingers were quivering. Tom was a big shot on the football field, twice the man I had been, but this was his first experience with murder and he was like a helpless, scared kid. There was quiet urgency in his voice.

"You've got to help me get rid of the body."

I stared at him, at his ashen face, at his lips bleeding where his teeth had bitten into them.

"You know what that means?" I said. "What they'll do to us if we're caught?"

"Yes." It was a barely audible whisper.

"And you still want to go through with it?"

"Yes."

"All right," I said. "I'm a fool. I've always been a fool and I'll probably die a fool. Maybe sooner than I ex-

pect—and a lot more violently. I'll do it because I believe in you, Tom. But we won't hide the body. We'll have to get it out of the building and dump it somewhere where the cops can find it. I'm not hiding evidence of murder. But there's one thing first."

"What's that?" He eyed me suspiciously.

I looked at Carla. "You've got to check out of here. Catch the first train back to Los Angeles. For the next few days you're deaf and dumb. You're not to see Tom until this thing blows over. Is that straight?"

"No," she said. "It is not."

I put my hands on my hips. "Now what?"

"Just this. Tom is in trouble. Somebody's trying to frame him for murder. He's innocent and I know it. Besides that he's my husband. I'm not going to desert him when he's in trouble. I'm sticking. I want to help."

I CONSIDERED the defiant thrust of her chin, the resolute glint in those blue eyes, and I knew it would be useless to argue. What can you do with a girl in love—especially when she's a thoroughbred?

"All right," I sighed. "Nobody listens to me. The least you can do is make yourself scarce while we unload the corpse. Go to one of the gambling joints. Act casual."

I strode to the door, opened it a crack to swing a look up and down the hall, then slapped it shut, fast. There was a parade just leaving the elevator, heading our way down the hall. I didn't know whether their actual destination was Tom Grove's room, but I wasn't taking any chances. Slamming the door, twisting the key, I raced through to the connecting room and turned the latch on Tom's door.

"Police," I grunted when I faced them again. "Tom, go into your room, lock the connecting door. You just got in there, you found the room the way you left it, you don't know anything about any bodies. And good Lord,

man, get some color into your face. You look half dead yourself."

I got the flat of my hand against his back and sent him moving. I locked our side of the door, shot a quick look around the room and spied the big wardrobe trunk. Swinging it open, I got the corpse under the arms, yanked him across the floor and stuffed him inside the trunk. Then I asked Carla for the key and locked it.

At that moment we heard the pounding on Tom's door. Carla was watching me with bright eyes, her lips slightly parted. I stepped in front of her and put both hands on her shoulders.

"Listen, Miss Parkhurst. Get out—now. Go to the movies, any place. I don't know what their game is, but if they knew there was a body in Tom's room, they'll easily guess that it might have been lugged in here."

She let out a sharp gasp. Following her gaze I saw she was staring at the dark brown bloodstain on the floor. My head started to hum. I certainly wasn't working on all cylinders if I'd neglected a thing like that.

I dove for a small scatter rug under a table in the corner, whipped it out and spread it over the bloodstain. There were dull voices coming from Tom's room as I ushered Carla out into the hall and mutely pointed to the fire exit.

"Down there," I whispered.

"Where are you going?"

"I've got work to do."

After she'd disappeared, I sauntered casually down the hall and rapped on Tom Grove's door.

A cop came out into the hall and closed the door behind him. "What is it, buddy?" he wanted to know.

I let my eyes open in surprise, looked him up and down, reached over his shoulder and rapped on the door again.

"Hey, none of that," he snapped and grabbed for my arm. I got hold of his wrist, levered his arm over my shoulder, made a half twist, bent and pulled with all my might.

I don't know, I guess that cop must have weighed close to two hundred. But he left the ground like a startled frog, flew clean over my shoulder and cracked up against the opposite wall. He was still lying there when the door opened and a thick-chested cop with lieutenant's stripes peered out.

He gave the cop one look and his square tanned face hardened like granite. "What's going on here?"

I brushed my coat sleeves and shrugged. "I was calling on a friend of mine and this Cossack tried to manhandle me. I didn't like it."

He pursed his lips. "Oh, you didn't like it?"

"No."

"And who's the friend you want to see?"

"Thomas L. Grove, lumber salesman."

"Well, buddy, you can't see him. Beat it." He lent emphasis to his command by dropping one beefy palm on the butt of his service revolver, holstered at his belt.

"Say!" I whistled. "You're a cop. Tom must be in trouble. What's he done?"

"Beat it," the lieutenant growled.

"Sure," I said, "sure. Only I guess I better get a lawyer. Tom may want a habeas corpus."

THE cop I'd hit was still out. If there's one thing the law doesn't want it's a sharp criminal lawyer breaking up their little basement discussions with the springing of a judge's order. They've got to have something to hold their man on. In this case I assumed they did not. For one thing they didn't have the corpse, hence they weren't even sure there had been a murder.

The lieutenant gave me a look that could wither the hardiest cactus growing right outside of Las Vegas. He held the door open and said:

"Buddy, you're not going anywhere. Come on in and join the party."

I didn't let him see my grin. I entered the room. Tom was standing in the center of the floor, watching three plainclothes men tossing clothes out of his grip. They were at the bureau, yanking out drawers, and one was patting the lining of his coat hanging in the closet.

"What's up?" I asked.

Tom spread his hands. "They're looking for money."

"What money?"

"Fifteen thousand dollars. They say I stole the payroll."

I turned to the police lieutenant. "You got a search warrant?"

"I don't need any."

"Oh, yes you do," I said. "Tom, we can throw these men out of here and the law will be on our side."

The plainclothes men looked up at that and grinned. One of them started rubbing his knuckles as if in anticipation. The lieutenant strode forward and planted himself solidly in front of me.

"Just who are you?"

"I told you, a friend of Grove's."

"You a lawyer?"

"No."

"Then keep out of this. Go on searching, Sam. That money must be here somewhere."

The door burst open and I turned and there was Carla Parkhurst. The man with her was in his middle thirties, tall, sharply chiseled features, slate-gray eyes as dull as two opals. His manner suggested competence, efficiency, authority.

Tom said: "Mr. Kirk! Gosh, I'm glad you're here."

"We just met downstairs," Carla volunteered. "He's flown in from Los Angeles with some crazy story about your having stolen the payroll."

Kirk's gray eyes darted around the room, selected the lieutenant, addressed him: "You in charge of the investigation?"

The lieutenant had a healthy respect for Kirk's brusk air. "Yes," he said. "I'm Lieutenant Rider of the Las Vegas police force. I guess you're the

man who wired me to hold this guy Grove."

Kirk nodded. "That's right. I'm general manager of the Parkhurst Lumber Company. Soon as I learned about the robbery I contacted you."

Carla pulled at his arm, anger flashing through her blue eyes. "But, Ronald, what makes you think Tom stole the money?"

"I don't think, I know. One of our bookkeepers, fellow by the name of Diehl, told me. He saw Grove scoop the money out of my desk just before he left on this trip. I'm rather shocked, Grove. We trusted you implicitly." He turned to Lieutenant Rider. "That money must be here. I demand that you make a thorough search for it."

Tom looked helplessly around. "Diehl," he said in a very small voice. "Diehl said I stole the money?"

ONE of the detectives who'd been searching through the grip let out a whistle and straightened, holding up a document. Rider took it, glanced at it, wordlessly handed it to Kirk.

The general manager of the Parkhurst Lumber Company gave it a cursory look, then turned to Carla.

"This is a marriage license, Carla. When did it happen?"

"Yesterday afternoon in Los Angeles."

"Does your father know about it?"

"Not yet."

"Where are you stopping?"

"In the adjoining room—"

I cut into her answer with a loud cough, but it wasn't soon enough. She'd spilled the story already. I saw all eyes turn to the connecting door. Lieutenant Rider glided over and reached for the knob, but before he touched it, another of the detectives vented a loud exclamation. We all turned.

He was standing at a bureau drawer, holding a small automatic pistol. "Look what I found, lieutenant."

Rider accepted it. His eyes narrowed and he lifted the barrel to his

nostrils. "Cordite," he snapped. "This gun was recently fired. You got a license for it, Grove?"

Tom's voice was shaky. "Of course not. It isn't mine."

"Yeah. That's what they all say."

Kirk said: "I'm sorry, Carla. If I'd known I wouldn't have carried this thing through. We'll have to continue the search now. It's out of my hands. After all if we don't find the money I'll be responsible. It was taken from my desk."

Rider tried the connecting door, found it locked, and sent one of his men to the desk for a key. Several minutes later the door was thrown open.

They did a pretty good job of upsetting Carla's belongings and still didn't find the money. One of the dicks tried the trunk and found it locked.

"What's in there, Miss Parkhurst?" Rider demanded.

"Just some of my own personal things. Nothing that would interest you."

"You'll have to open it."

"Supposing I refuse."

"Then we'll force the lock."

I'd been quiet long enough. Things were growing too hot. I said: "You'd better think about it twice, lieutenant."

"Nonsense," snapped Kirk. "As general manager of the Parkhurst Lumber Company I'll accept full responsibility. We'll back you to the limit, Rider."

"That, however, is not the law," I told him. "I warn you not to touch anything further in this room."

Talk, just talk. You know, shooting my mouth off, stalling for time. If they opened that trunk we were sunk. There was a dead man in there. The man who'd witnessed, according to Kirk, the robbery of the payroll by Tom Grove. That was certainly motive enough for Tom to kill him.

A slow grin had spread over Rider's blocky face. His gun was out, hefted in his palm. "I'm opening that trunk,"

he said, "and I'd like to see you try to stop me."

He stuck the barrel under the hasp of the lock and pried. It flew open with a *spang*. He motioned to one of the plainclothes men and the detective moved forward. Grabbing both upper corners of the trunk he swung them apart.

Both Rider and the detective gave a hoarse shout and jumped back. Diehl's dead body, hands crossed over his chest, legs folded under him, snapped out of that trunk like a jack-in-the-box, and rolled over, face up, on the floor.

FOR the space of several seconds no one spoke. Carla's face was bone white. Tom's teeth were imbedded in his lips. Rider's jaw had fallen slack and he stared down at the corpse with wide bulging eyes.

Then his jaws clamped shut and his mouth made a razor thin gash across his face. His voice was sarcastic. "O-ho! No wonder you didn't want me to open that trunk. Who is he?"

Kirk whispered: "That's Herbert Diehl, the bookkeeper."

My eyes locked with Rider's. He said: "Well, buddy, I don't need a search warrant now." He shifted his gaze to Tom. "Why'd you kill him? Never mind, I can guess."

"But I didn't," Tom said. "I was in this room with Miss Parkhurst and when I returned back to my own he was in there dead."

That'll give you an idea how mixed up Tom was. Calling his own wife by her maiden name.

Rider holstered his gun and rubbed the tips of his short squat fingers together, then stabbed his thumb at me. "What's your name?"

"William Hawke," I told him.

"Business?"

"I'm a private detective."

His brows jumped up. "You don't say. I just love private detectives. What are you doing in Las Vegas?"

"Working on a case."

"What about?"

"You'll have to ask my client."

"All right, who is he?"

"That's a confidential matter. I'm not sure he'd want his name known."

Rider was getting sore. Hard bright lights glittered in his eyes and little ridges of muscle bunched white-ly at the corners of his mouth.

"You're pretty smart, aren't you?" he said softly.

"I get around."

"Well, Hawke, I think you know plenty about this business that you're keeping under your hat. How would you like me to pull you in as an accessory after the fact?"

"Nuts. My lawyer would spring me in a minute."

"You think so?"

"Certainly. The charge wouldn't hold even here in Las Vegas. I can't be held as an accessory after the fact until I give aid to the murderer. Well, you don't know who the murderer is. You only think you do."

Rider flushed. "I'll know soon as I get prints off that gun."

"Nobody ever got a good set of prints off a gun in a murder case. Why don't you give him the nitrate test?"

"Yeah," said Rider, "and supposing he was wearing a glove or had his hand wrapped up in a handkerchief. All we really need is to find that payroll in here and Grove's goose is cooked."

THEY started searching again, and I walked through the connecting door to Grove's bathroom. I turned on the water tap, waited for it to run cold. The bathroom was a small cubicle and the heat was stifling. The only time it's cold in Las Vegas is during the night, and then the desert air grows brisk and chill. I looked around for a window but couldn't find any, just an air vent, high in the wall above the bathtub. My gaze slid past it, then jerked back.

The vent was protected by a small metal grating over which a thin film of gray dust had settled. I crossed over, stood up on the edge of the tub,

examined it carefully. In the wall, around the beveled edge of the grating were faint scratches, and in several spots on the metal itself, gleamed black enamel where fingers had fumbled away the layer of dust.

I tested the grating, moved it slowly. It came free in my hand. I reached down into the vent, felt a piece of string dangling with a weight at the far end. The near end was attached inside the vent to the wall with a thumb tack. I pulled the string out.

It was the payroll.

I sat down on the edge of the tub and thought about it. I thought about it harder than I'd ever thought about anything in my life. It looked bad.

Supposing Tom had been unable to resist the lure of fifteen thousand dollars. Maybe he'd figured that with his new position as the boss' son-in-law they wouldn't prosecute. Diehl could have seen him steal the money, slipped into the room, and tried to hijack it himself. What if Tom had caught him and sent a bullet through his head.

And then it struck me and I could have kicked myself for not seeing it sooner. It wasn't much, but it might be the single key to the whole solution.

I walked back into Carla's room. They were cutting through the mattress with razor blades.

I said: "That's enough of the sabotage. If you're looking for the payroll here it is."

Several pairs of startled eyes focused upon me. You could hear a pin drop, the room had grown so quiet. Kirk broke the silence with a triumphant snort of satisfaction.

"What did I tell you? I knew he'd stolen it."

"Where did you find it?" demanded Rider.

"Suspended from a string in the air vent."

Carla stared at Tom in horror-stricken astonishment. "Tom!" she whispered. "You didn't—"

"Yes," I said. "Tom hid it there. Didn't you, Tom?"

He tried to say something but his

larynx was locked tight. I felt sorry for him. And I want to say that I'm damn glad nobody tosses that kind of temptation my way. Fifteen thousand dollars is a whale of a lot of government lettuce and a man's code of ethics can easily break under the weight of it.

RIDER moved close and dropped his hand on Tom's shoulder. "That settles it," he said. "I'm placing you under arrest for murder, Grove. We'll let the robbery charge slide for a while."

"Not so fast," I broke in. "All I said was that Tom hid the money in the vent. He didn't steal it, nor did he kill Diehl. He found that money in his grip where Diehl had placed it."

"Diehl!" Rider exclaimed.

"Yes," I said. "At the behest of Kirk. Perhaps Kirk had something on Diehl and made him do it."

Kirk laughed. "You're crazy."

"I doubt it. What gave you away, Kirk, was the fact that when you were supposed to have discovered the robbery you didn't immediately wire the Las Vegas police. You knew where Grove was heading. Yet they didn't pick him up at the station. They didn't even arrive at the hotel until you'd had a chance to come here first.

"You suspected Diehl was up to something. You didn't trust him. You followed him here, found him trying to hijack the payroll. You sent a slug through his head. That was even better, much better. It put Grove out of the way for good."

Kirk's face was bereft of any expression whatsoever. His opal eyes were two dull marbles set into his head. His voice was quiet, contained. His whole manner had the deadly coldness of a rattler poised to strike.

"And what would my motive be?"

"That's easy," I said. "Everybody knows that old man Parkhurst hasn't been active in the business for a long time. As general manager everything was left under your control. You've

been embezzling from the firm for years. You knew that Grove was going to marry Carla. You could see it in the cards. That meant Grove would get a high position in the firm and would find out about your defalcations. You had to prevent that marriage, or get Grove out of the way. A robbery would do it. A murder would do it better."

"Say," said Tom, his eyes glowing with excitement. "If Diehl was the bookkeeper he could have gotten wise to what Kirk was doing. He may even have been blackmailing him."

"Certainly," I added. "He probably lured Diehl into your room under some pretext and killed him there. You found the money in your bag, didn't you, Tom? You wanted to hide it until you could find out what it was all about."

Tom snapped me up quickly. "That's right."

Kirk hadn't moved, hadn't flickered an eyelash.

"And now," he said, "how are you going to prove all this?"

I smiled. "By searching your be-

longings and finding the silencer from the gun with which you killed Diehl and planted in Grove's bureau."

That hit home. It cleared all bases. Kirk moved fast. There was a plain-clothes man guarding the hall door and one at the door leading into the other room. Both those exits were blocked, but the third was free. It was the one Tom had planned on using to get rid of Diehl's body. The window—

Kirk reached it in one long flying lunge that carried him clean through the pane of glass with shattering force. He let out a blood-curdling scream as he ripped through. And then, seconds later, there was the dull thud of his body impacting against the concrete down in the courtway.

Carla's head was buried in Tom's shoulder. I looked at Rider and said:

"Don't look so glum. You won't have to sit in a sticky courtroom and give testimony. The state saves the expense of a trial. The local mortician gets a little business. The Las Vegas police force gets credit for recovering a stolen payroll. Everybody wins—except Kirk."





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The Heist Master

By Theodore Stratton

Steve Besson had no use for a guy who thinks with his trigger finger. Be smart and let the old brains do the work, was Besson's motto — until fate clamped a stop-light on his headwork.

AT PRECISELY 3:17 P.M. Steve Besson, immaculate in dark overcoat and hat, alighted from a cab at Becker Street and Park Avenue. Handing the cabby a dollar bill folded lengthwise, he airily waved away the sixty cents change.

"Thanks, guv'nor," the cabby grunted and slid his cab expertly into the heavy traffic.

Besson hesitated before the row of imposing business houses. Then shifting his cane to his left armpit, he fumbled in both overcoat pockets and eventually extracted a card.

FELIX MARCUM
INVESTMENT CONSULTANT
138 Park Avenue

Holding the card prominently before him and consulting the numbers, Besson proceeded leisurely along the sidewalk. He passed 142, 140, then he headed confidently toward the doorway leading to the foyer of the main building—138.

Reflected obliquely in the broad

window of No. 140—the *CONTINENTAL AERONAUTICS CORPORATION*—Besson saw a maroon coupé glide to the curb. The tall figure of Max Trant, assistant treasurer of Continental, slid from beneath the wheel and opened the door. Things began to happen.

"Bugs" Nugent threaded the passersby and reached the coupé. Three others—Besson identified them as Solly Sears, Izzy Kaplitz and an ex-pug called the Wasp—crowded Trant as he stepped to the sidewalk. Guns gleamed in the spent rays of the wintry sun.

Besson wheeled slowly toward the holdup. There was no need for speed. Not yet. The police were on the scene. Two uniformed men leaped from a delivery truck parked just short of the crosswalk; three detectives swarmed from No. 140; a pencil peddler dropped his tray and drew an automatic; a "white wings" fished into his barrel and came out with a Tommy gun. They closed in.

Some one barked: "Hands up, Bugs!"

The gunmen whirled. Instantly Nu-

gent fired from the hip and a detective went down. One of the cops, in close, fired into Nugent's back and spun him around abruptly. Sears and Kaplitz fled precipitately and the Wasp plunged straight into the streaming traffic. There was a flurry of gunfire, answering shots that splattered the plate glass windows and the brief, staccato rattle of the Tommy gun.

Pedestrians screamed and ran blindly. Not too blindly, because the sidewalk next to the coupé cleared miraculously. Besson noted every item in the kaleidoscopic action: Sears writhing a dozen feet from Nugent and the sprawling detective; Kaplitz almost at the corner; the police occupied and alert; and Trant crouched on the floorboards. Into this turmoil Besson moved calmly and swiftly. He reached the coupé.

"Get up, Max!" he called reassuringly. "We'll drive to headquarters."

As Trant looked up, Besson flipped open the underside of his overcoat lapel. A badge flashed. *INSPECTOR*. Trant scrambled behind the wheel.

"Straight down Park and turn right at the first light." Besson spoke soothingly as he dropped alongside Trant. "We've got 'em all."

TRANT cut the wheels and swung into the strangely deserted avenue. Besson glanced backward as they fled down Park. He heard the wail of approaching sirens and as the car swung sharply to the right, glimpsed the Wasp huddled on the far side of the pavement.

"Easy, easy, Max," he warned the frightened driver. "No sense getting killed in an accident! The danger's over. We'll be at the station house in a couple of minutes."

They went crosstown three blocks on the green and struck quieter traffic.

"Left!" Besson ordered.

Trant turned and threaded a narrow, curving street flanked by blank

warehouses and loft buildings. Besson leaned forward, stared ahead.

"Quick, Max!" he directed excitedly. "Pull to the curb!"

Besson drew his gun, eyed the street searchingly. As the coupé braked to a stop, he turned to the bewildered Trant—and smiled.

"Sorry, Max," he said pleasantly, "but we part company. It's been a pleasant ride until now. Hand over that envelope with the executives' payroll and we'll part peacefully. If not—" Besson wiggled the leveled gun significantly.

Through terrified lips Trant managed to stammer: "Wh—why I th—thought you were an inspector!"

Besson smiled indulgently. "Precisely what you were supposed to think! Come, Max, I grow restive. That payroll!"

Silently Trant extracted a fat envelope from an inner pocket. "Thanks, Max." Besson's voice went hard and crisp. "Step out and walk along the street and double back slowly. I'll follow in the car." Again he wiggled the gun. "And don't forget about this!"

Trant slid out and moved off. As he started back, Besson shifted gears quickly and shot the car across the intersection. He avoided a nasty patch of dirty brown ice four blocks farther on and swung north into Ninth Avenue.

"A cinch," he murmured admiringly. "The cops wipe out Nugent's mob, Trant has a story for his grandchildren, and I collect \$12,000. The Steve Besson touch of genius!" He gave himself an imaginary pat on the back.

He'd slip an extra five hundred to quiet that rat Mattoli who had cased the job so efficiently for Nugent. Mattoli had tipped Besson off and Steve had planned his own stickup. Nugent had an itchy trigger finger and by phoning the story anonymously to the police, the payroll could be lifted during the shooting that was sure to follow. It had worked out. The disguise and the badge completed the picture.

Besson drove a dozen blocks. Pass-

ing Pearlman Street, he swung to the curb. He parked the coupé and walked into the corner drug store. After the stinging cold, the air inside was stifling. He opened his overcoat and drew out some change.

"Three for fifty." He pointed to the after-dinner size. Then he walked nonchalantly the full length of the store and stepped into a phone booth. He left the door partly ajar and lifted the receiver. Watching the side door, he yanked off the trick mustache and carefully wiped off the black penciled eyebrows. Three quick steps and he emerged on Pearlman.

JUST use the old brains, he thought triumphantly, walking alongside the noisy traffic. Everything was planned. In five minutes he'd be safe in his apartment. Those dumb punks! He swung along jauntily. Just like Nugent to shoot. Thinks with his trigger finger! Better be smart and let the brain do the work.

The wind off the river snarled along the street. Besson shivered. That store had been uncomfortably hot and he felt the cold now that the excitement was over. He should have worn a scarf, still— Again he shivered. It was bitterly cold and the wind stung his exposed throat. Abruptly he turned up the overcoat collar until the lapels fitted snugly under his chin. That was better! He'd have a couple of quick ones from the bottle of Scotch.

Thirty feet from the next intersection, a policeman stepped from a doorway and watched the teeming traffic flowing toward the bridge. Besson slowed momentarily, a sudden fear tightening his muscles. "There's noth-

ing to fear," he reassured himself, and strode on.

Besson was ten feet away when the policeman turned. Besson saw his eyes widen and caught the full impact of the surprised stare. The cop tensed and his hand dropped to his side as he swung around to block the sidewalk.

Every nerve in Besson's frame jumped. Somewhere he had slipped up! Perhaps his description had been broadcast. That was it! He should have ditched the overcoat and hat. The cop's hand moved toward his holster. In that split second Besson acted. He plunged straight across Pearlman dodging the roaring traffic. No dumb cop would arrest him—

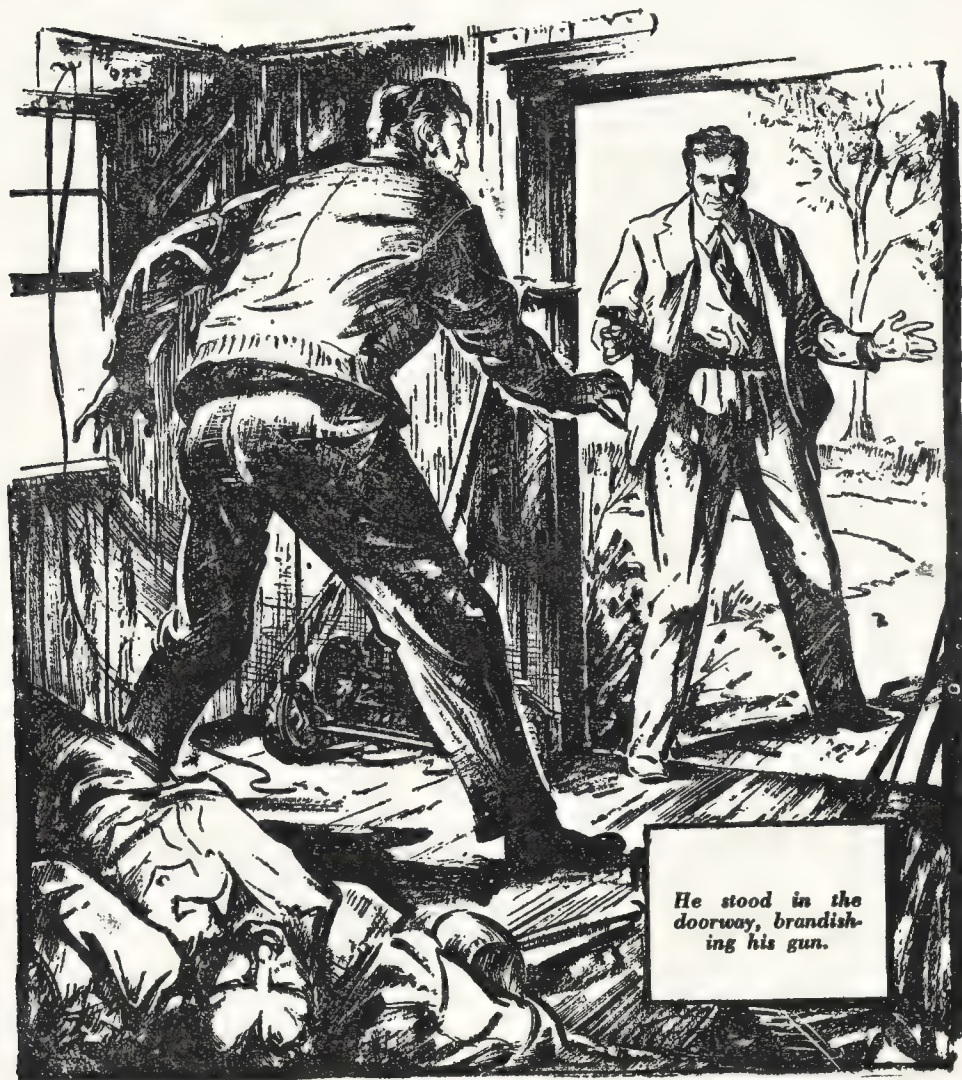
A cabby glimpsed him and jammed on the brakes. The swerving taxi narrowly missed Besson, but he side-stepped and raced on. A sedan coming up fast struck him a glancing blow that shoved him headlong toward the curb. A truck rushing three tons of aluminum from Edgewater to the Continental Aeronautics Corporation plant at Long Island City shot through on the inside lane. The driver never saw Besson's sprawling figure. . . .

"I seen him coming down Pearlman," the policeman explained under his breath to the cabby, "and my eyes pop. I just stepped from Healy's where I'd had a couple of nips, it was that cold, and the whisky was strong on me lips. He's got his coat collar turned up and on the lapel is this badge staring me in the face. INSPECTOR! Caught drinkin' on duty! I'm that scared I just stand there and stare at him. Then he ducks across the street!"



Corpse Behind the 8 Ball

Mystery Novelette



He stood in the doorway, brandishing his gun.

By J. Lane Linklater

CHAPTER I

PHIL MASSEN watched the couple come out of the building across the street. The girl was a beauty. As nearly as Phil could make

out at the distance, the man was smoothly handsome, and young enough to be interesting to the girl. Phil knew the girl very well. He didn't know the man at all.

This was a special assignment for

Investigator Massen's girl friend had a job with a glamour girl escort outfit. But Massen's suspicions were aroused when her date took her to a club where they played cricket—with corpses.

Phil Massen. His own assignment. Strictly personal. Nothing to do with the D.A. This was a day off for him. Phil was down on the books at the D.A.'s office as a special investigator, but Lucile always said that that was hokum, that he was just a plain lug off a detective.

The man and the girl across the street stood and talked for a few moments. Then the man lifted his hat, got in a taxi and was gone.

Phil crossed the street.

The girl smiled and said: "Good morrow, my darling."

Phil grunted, took her arm and marched her down to the nearest coffee shop.

The girl said cheerily: "It's a bright morning, darling. Why look so glum?"

Phil scowled. The scowl didn't hurt his looks much. He was young enough himself—not yet thirty—and his lean boyish face went well with his tall spare figure.

"It's ten o'clock," he said. "Ten in the morning. Isn't it a little unusual for you to be on the job in the morning?"

"It's an unusual job," the girl said.

Phil knew that. It was an unusual girl, too. Lucile worked for the Glamour Girl Escort Supply Service. Well, she was glamorous enough. Five feet seven of lineal delight. Dark eyes and scarlet lips that rocked a man's senses. A voice that soothed and disturbed at the same time.

She had no business working for an escort service. Phil had said so a thousand times. But it was queer what a stalwart will a girl could have—a girl like Lucile.

LUCILE had her own argument. "It's like this, darling," she had said. "There's Beatrice. My little sis-

ter. She and I were brought up wrong—too much money. Now we've got no dad, no mom, and no cash. I've got to take care of Beatrice. She's different from me. I can rough it—I *enjoy* roughing it. Like my dad. But Beatrice is like mom was. She's got to land in a soft spot.

"She's seventeen now, and I've got to keep her in that private school, got to keep her in the right crowd. In a couple of years she'll be off my hands. She's pretty, charming. She'll get a rich husband."

"Rich husband!" Phil had exploded. "Blah!"

"Now, you know rich husbands don't interest me. Wouldn't have one on a bet. But Beatrice is different. And there's no other job I could make enough money at. You and I together couldn't make enough at anything else, even if I'd take your money for Beatrice's support—which I wouldn't."

So that's how it stood.

And Phil stared glumly at Lucile. He said: "Well, something must be doing. You usually work at night. There are no night clubs open at this time of day."

Lucile sipped her coffee. "I'll tell you about it," she said, "if you keep your hands off. Don't go trailing me."

Phil threatened idly: "I'll trail you if you *don't* tell me. I'll interfere. I'll embarrass you. I'll start a fight. Who's the guy and what does he want?"

Lucile smiled again. "Nice-looking, isn't he? He has pleasant manners. And it's a pleasant job. No night spots. It's a day assignment. The man's name is Roger Bellowe—"

"How do you know?"

"He said so. And he wants me to go with him to a cricket match."

"A what?"

"A cricket match, darling. It's an English game."

"So I've heard."

"However, according to Mr. Bellowe, there are quite a number of cricket clubs in this country. There's one south of the city, called the Woodford Wells Cricket Club. The game today is starting at ten this morning, and lasts until dusk. The game is called at one for lunch and at four for tea and cake."

"Tea and cake!" muttered Phil. "What a game!"

"It should be interesting," laughed Lucile. "Anyway, Mr. Bellowe is not one of the players, so we didn't have to get out there for the start. He'll drive me out at eleven."

"But it isn't regular," objected Phil. "What does he want you for?"

"It is a little off-trail," conceded Lucile. "But Mr. Bellowe explained it to me. He's a stranger here, from St. Louis. He knows only one person, one of the cricket players. And Mr. Bellowe is supposed to have a sister, who is supposed to be with him, but she couldn't come."

"You mean," said Phil, "that you are to pass yourself off as this guy's sister!"

"Right."

"Then I don't like it." Phil glowered suspiciously. "Suppose some guy tries to date you?"

Lucile said comfortingly: "That's taken care of, darling. If any lug approaches me for that purpose, I'm merely to tell him to see my brother about it."

"I still don't like it."

Lucile laughed pleasantly and finished her coffee. "Darling," she said, "there's nothing scandalous about being some man's sister. The pay is swell; it's easy work, and I'm glad to get it. I'll have to be trotting. See you later."

PHIL moped for an hour, but he couldn't rest. He didn't like the idea of Lucile being Mr. Bellowe's sis-

ter. He didn't like the idea of Mr. Bellowe himself. Anyhow, he didn't like the idea, any part of it. There was something phony somewhere.

He found out where the Woodford Wells Cricket Club was located and drove out there, fast. Lucile wasn't going to like this.

It was a bright day and the cricket club, Phil found when he got there, was a pleasant place. It was more of a plant than he had expected. There was a cricket field and, adjoining it, some tennis courts. The cricket field was about the size of a baseball field, only shaped round, roughly. It was all grass, well-kept, well-trimmed. Where the cricket field bulged out toward the tennis courts were a few buildings.

Phil found out about the buildings. The two larger ones were clubhouses, one for gents and the other for ladies. A little to the right of the gents' clubhouse was a small structure, like a double-size sentry box, which was for the storekeepers. Farther away, to the left of the ladies' clubhouse, was a tool house, which was partially screened by willows.

There were chairs and benches around the clubhouse, and perhaps a hundred people thronged there. Evidently the general public was not expected to show up in great numbers. There was no admission charge.

Phil stood in front of the gents' clubhouse. He was a little at a loss as to how to proceed. It was something like crashing a party. No one paid any attention to him or, if they did, they were too polite to show it. He couldn't see anything of Lucile. However, although there were no ladies in or near the gents' clubhouse, there were men over in front of the ladies' clubhouse, so no doubt she was there, with Bellowe.

The game was in progress. Someone hit the ball, out there on the field. A few hands were clapped. It puzzled Phil. There didn't seem to be any excitement. Yes, perhaps there was, but

it seemed to be a sort of quiet, disciplined excitement.

A man was just passing in front of him and Phil said: "Who's the big shot here?"

The man was short, plump and pleasant-faced. His clothes were rough and soiled—an employee, no doubt. He looked at Phil respectfully.

"The big shot?" he said. "I suppose you mean Mr. Lowther, sir. He's not one of the players, but he's president of the club. I think he's inside."

Phil went inside. There were dressing rooms and an office, and a large room with chairs and tables, and a bar along one side. He asked the bar-keep for Mr. Lowther.

Mr. Lowther, it appeared, was right there at the bar, finding sportive pleasure in a whisky and soda. He was a man of nearly seventy, but large and bony and politely vigorous. He had a face something like Julius Caesar's.

Phil took him to one side. He said: "Mr. Lowther, I'm from the D.A.'s office." He showed his official card. "I had private orders to come out here and stick around."

Mr. Lowther seemed faintly astonished. "Really? For what purpose?"

"I don't know," admitted Phil. "I hope nothing much happens. Probably just a precaution. I thought I'd better let you know I was here—in case. By the way, is there anything special about today's game?"

"In a way, yes," said Mr. Lowther. "It's a sort of farewell game for Ted Latta."

"Who's Ted Latta?"

MR. LOWTHER'S ample eyebrows twitched. "Eh? Oh, of course you don't know. Ted is one of our best cricketers, and an excellent chap. He's English. Most of our players are English. Ted is leaving next week for England. The war, you know."

"A young chap, huh?"

"Ted is about thirty. He's a very good amateur flyer—has his own

plane. That's why he's going. We're making an occasion of the game today. In honor of Ted, we're raising a fund for war refugees. It's in the nature of a gamble. You see, we're playing the Tunbridge Green Club, who have come all the way from Chicago."

"But what's the gamble?"

"The Woodford Wells Club will donate a hundred dollars for every run that Tunbridge scores, and the Tunbridge Green Club will put up a hundred for every run that Woodford scores. In that way, of course, the losing team will pay the most."

"Will that make much of a pot?"

"Fair. Probably about fifty thousand dollars."

Phil whistled gently. "Fifty thousand!"

Mr. Lowther smiled. "You see, in an ordinary half-day game of cricket, each team gets one inning. But this is a full-day game, and each team should get two innings, or close to it. At any rate, we'll play until dusk. There should be a total of at least five hundred runs."

"Five hundred!"

"This is cricket, not baseball, Mr. Massen." Mr. Lowther started to turn away. "Well, I hope you enjoy the game."

"Before you go," Phil said hastily, "show me your Ted Latta."

"Certainly."

Mr. Lowther led him out of the clubhouse and pointed down to the playing field. He said: "Ted is the man just this side of the nearer wicket. His position corresponds, in a general way, to that of shortstop in your baseball." Mr. Lowther smiled. "It is what you'd call a hot spot."

The man indicated was well-built, a little under six feet, and even at a distance Phil could see that he was tawny-haired.

At the moment, the bowler shot the ball down the pitch with the regulation overhead motion. *Bang! Slap!*

"Oh, well done!" exclaimed Mr. Lowther.

It was a hard-hit ball, and it crashed off the bat in the general direction of Ted Latta. Latta shot up off his feet and speared it. The batsman was out, and Ted got a smattering of applause.

Phil said: "That guy isn't wearing a mitt."

"None of the players wear gloves," informed Mr. Lowther, "except the wicket keeper—or catcher, as you would call him. And he only wears one to protect his knuckles, not his palms."

"But that ball is hard, like a baseball, isn't it?"

"Practically the same."

Phil thought maybe this cricket thing wasn't as soft as he had thought. He said: "There are two men at bat at the same time, huh?"

Mr. Lowther drew on his reserve of patience and said politely: "Quite correct, sir. As you may have noted, there are eleven men on a side. The Woodford Wells eleven are now in the field. The Tunbridge Green Club are at bat. The pitch, you'll observe, is not in a corner of the field, as in baseball, but out in the center of the field. The pitch is approximately the same length as a baseball pitch.

"There is what is called a wicket at each end of the pitch. A wicket is a set of three sticks, and the bowler—or pitcher—bowls at one wicket from the other. When a batsman hits the ball, he runs for the other wicket, and his companion batsman runs from *his* wicket to the one at the other end—in short, they change places. As often as they succeed in that they score a run. That, sir, is all the instruction I can give you at this time. I hope you enjoy it. I must be going."

Mr. Lowther went.

Phil Massen was watching Ted Latta. The lithe cricketer, apparently taking advantage of the lull while the new batsman was coming in, ran across to the ladies' clubhouse. He chatted for a moment with a couple

standing there, before loping back to his position.

The couple he talked to were Lucile and the man who had hired her, the man called Roger Bellowe.

CHAPTER II

PHIL MASSEN walked rapidly across to the ladies' clubhouse. Lucile and Bellowe were strolling toward a bench. Lucile saw him first and the lines of her face straightened dangerously. Obviously, she intended to ignore him altogether.

Phil said loudly: "Hello, Lucile!"

Quickly, Lucile smiled, as if she weren't even a little annoyed. She said "Well, hello, Phil!"

The man with her turned about, fast. Phil still didn't like him. A man of about thirty-five, straight pointed features, smart gray eyes. And the eyes held a question.

Lucile said: "Mr. Bellowe, this is Mr. Massen." She was going to lie about it, Phil thought. "I haven't met Mr. Massen for years. I was in the seventh grade with him."

Bellowe bobbed his head pleasantly. "I'm glad, Mr. Massen. You're a club member?"

"No," said Phil. "But I know a few of the boys. Mr. Lowther is a special friend of mine."

Lucile said: "Why, Phil! I had no idea you knew—"

"Remember, you haven't seen me for years!" Phil shook his finger. "I've met a lot of people in the last few years."

Lucile's voice was soft, but a bit steely. "No doubt." She turned to Bellowe. "Shall we go, Roger?"

"Of course," Bellowe said. "We'll see you again, Mr. Massen?"

"Wouldn't surprise me," said Phil.

They walked away toward a bench. Halfway there, Lucile said something to Bellowe, came back alone.

Her face had somehow hardened. "I guess you know," she said, "that I can't overlook this, Phil. Following me, checking up on me, is the one

thing I can't stand for. You know that. I won't be seeing you again. I'm sorry."

Phil said: "Okay." He was feeling very bitter. "Maybe you can get yourself a rich one, too."

He was sorry about that as soon as he had said it, especially when he saw the look on her face. He watched her join Bellowe, then strolled back to the gents' clubhouse. It was time, he thought, for a drink. For a time, however, he stood at the foot of the clubhouse steps and watched the game. This was cricket, not baseball; still, it was a game, and they used a bat and a ball. Any kind of a game—with a bat and a ball—was fascinating to Phil Massen.

Presently he went in to the bar.

The game was going on, down there on the field, but several men were lined up at the bar. Nice comfortable way of taking your sport, Phil thought. These fellows were interested in the game, but, as it was played, they could take time out for a drink without losing track.

So Phil had a drink. He had two drinks. The way he was feeling, he was good for several, but he heard a voice beside him.

The voice was strange, and pitched low: "Have one on me, huh?"

It was a little man, and Phil glanced down at him. Quite a little man. There were broad green stripes in his blue suit. His big-mouthed grinning face was impudently cheerful, and thoroughly crooked.

"Don't mind if I do," Phil said.

The little man squinted up at Phil, lowered his voice again. "Let's get over to a table, huh? Got something to tell you."

They took their drinks to a corner table.

The man leaned across the table. His eyebrows came down low, secretly, like his voice. "You're the law, ain't you?"

Phil stared. He said: "I like to know who I'm talking to."

"Why, sure," said the man. "Sure.

I'm Ed Beach. I'm from Chi. I can always tell a lawman. Well, I've got something for you! There's stuff going on!"

"Okay, Beach. Let's have it."

ED BEACH of Chicago grinned. "Sure. I'll give you what I know, but that ain't much. A guy named Carsen hired me to come here from Chi."

"Who's Carsen?"

"He's captain of the visiting team, a Chicago man."

"What's your job?"

"I'm to watch a guy named Bellowe."

"Bellowe, huh? Why watch him?"

Beach shrugged. "The way I get it, Carsen is up to some kind of a crooked job. This Bellowe knows him and is in the way. I'm to watch to see who Bellowe talks to."

Phil twirled his glass. "You mean that's all you're to do—just watch Bellowe?"

"Yes."

"So you watch Bellowe. Then you contact Carsen?"

"Sure. Every once in a while, when no one is looking, I see Carsen and tell him about Bellowe."

"And you don't know *why* Carsen wants you to do this?"

"I ain't got an idea," Beach said solemnly.

Phil studied the little man. He said: "Carsen brings you here from Chicago to do a job for him. It looks like you can't get into trouble just for watching a guy, so why tell me?"

Beach ran the back of his hand over his mouth. "I don't know," he said. "I just don't like trouble. I'm a plumber, see?" He brought a union card out of his pocket, showed it to Phil. The card showed that Ed Beach was a member of the union in good standing. He put the card away again. "I did some work for Carsen a few times, so he knows me. He offers me expense money and a hundred bucks to come on this job. Easy dough. Now I'm sorry. I don't like trouble."

"I still don't see any trouble in it for you," Phil said.

Beach waved his hands. "Well, I don't know. It just smells bad. Me, I want my dough, so I'm sticking around. But it was my idea to get myself in the clear with you, that's all."

This little guy Beach, Phil thought, is smart, in his way. On the other hand, it might be a clumsy stall, something he'd had to think up fast. If he was telling the truth, the obvious thing to do was to keep close to the captain of the visiting team, Carlsen.

Phil got up. He said: "Okay. If you get anything more, I'll be around."

He walked out of the clubhouse. Coming up the clubhouse steps was Mr. Lowther.

"Ah," said Mr. Lowther, "I was just looking for you."

Mr. Lowther did not look shocked, perhaps because nothing could make him look that way. But something *had* happened.

Phil said: "I'm listening."

"I want you to look, not listen," said Mr. Lowther. "Kindly come with me."

He silently led the way past the rear of the ladies' clubhouse to the small building beyond. Its one door was at the back.

"This," explained Mr. Lowther, "is the tool and supply house." He looked around, as if to see that there was no one else present. "Please step in quickly, Mr. Massen."

Phil stepped in and Mr. Lowther followed and closed the door. Inside was a sizable room, pretty well filled with lawn rollers, mowers, garden tools, grass fertilizers and miscellaneous supplies.

A large front window overlooked the playing field, although a few trees somewhat obscured the view.

PHIL had seen a good many dead men. Sometimes it bothered him, sometimes not; it depended on who it was. This time it depressed him until he could feel a slight thumping

in his stomach. He recognized the man on the floor, below the front window. It was the short plump pleasant-faced man in working clothes, the one who had first directed him to Mr. Lowther.

Mr. Lowther said: "This is Henderson. He was our groundsman. A good man and a hard worker. A few minutes ago I wanted to ask him something, didn't see him anywhere, and finally came here looking for him."

"I suppose," said Phil, "this would be a natural place to look for him."

"Not usually," Mr. Lowther said. "That is, not on a day when there's a game on. He rarely came in here during a game, unless he had to get a tool for cleaning up."

Phil, down on his knees, was looking at Henderson. There wasn't much of a mess. A sharp hard blow against the left temple had done it. A heavy iron-headed mallet was lying near him.

Phil got up, poked around, looked about, moodily.

The large front window was a few feet from the corner to the left, not in the center of the wall. There was another window, a small one, in the left wall, catercorner from the front one. The large front window was closed. The small left one was open. Phil examined each window. The same make. Sash windows. Heavier than average.

Phil pushed up the bottom section of the front window. It came hard, took some working. He did not hold it, and it crashed down. The cord alongside had been cut.

Mr. Lowther had been following Phil closely. He said: "Queer thing about that rope, too."

Phil nodded. He had seen the rope. Not the window cord, but a somewhat larger rope which had been fastened to a nail driven into the top of the window's lower section. The rope was about ten feet long, and it trailed along the floor, apparently without

purpose. There was a loop at the end of the rope.

Thoughtfully, Phil pushed up the window again. It was even more of a job to get it open. This time he held it up, peered underneath.

Mr. Lowther said curiously: "What's that?"

Phil Massen said: "Nails. New ones. They've been driven into the bottom, from the outside, so that the points project down nearly half an inch."

"But why?"

Phil shrugged. He went to the smaller window at the left. This was open in the regular way. No cut cord. Nothing attached to it, everything apparently in order. But over the top of the window, in the wall, a spike had been driven, tip-tilted. A new spike.

Mr. Lowther suggested: "How about this rake?"

The rake was lying on the floor, a long-handled garden rake.

"I don't know," Phil said. "Maybe he came in for the rake and just dropped it when he got bopped."

Mr. Lowther wagged his head. "Frightful business, this."

"Might have been an accident," Phil said. "But not all accident. Something vicious about this."

Mr. Lowther peered at Phil gravely. "Mr. Massen," he said, "I'm going to ask a favor."

"Name it."

"This game today is rather a special affair. It would be a shame to spoil it. The game must go on, undisturbed." Mr. Lowther glanced down at Henderson. "He was only a groundsman, but he was also a sportsman. He would want it that way."

Phil grinned feebly. "You want me to keep it quiet?"

"Just as long as possible."

THOUGHTFULLY, Phil stared down at Henderson. Well, the poor guy was dead. Couldn't do anything for him. Maybe keeping it quiet—just as long as possible—

was the only favor that could be done him. Besides, Phil had his own worry, something that Mr. Lowther knew nothing about. There was Lucile! She was part of this, somehow.

No, he didn't want anyone from downtown poking into this yet. So he said: "Okay. I'll work this quietly. Do you know if anyone saw you come in here?"

"I think not."

"Then *you* keep it quiet." Phil gazed out of that front window. Out there on the playing field, the game was still going on. Phil was a baseball fan, but he had to admit that this cricket thing looked prettier than baseball, the rich green expanse of the field, and dotted on it the trim-clad figures of the players, all in white flannels, white shirts, white shoes. He turned to the door with Mr. Lowther. "I want you to do just one thing for me," he added.

"What?" said Mr. Lowther.

"Introduce me to the captain of the visiting team, this fellow Carsen."

Carsen was just coming out of the gents' clubhouse. He was a tall willowy man, middle-aged, with a grayish military mustache.

Mr. Lowther said: "Oh, hello, Carsen. Want you to meet a friend of mine. Mr. Massen, Mr. Carsen."

Carsen's humorous blue eyes flickered. He extended his hand.

Mr. Lowther added: "Mr. Massen is a stranger to cricket. He's looking into the game."

Carsen chuckled. "Hope you like it, Massen," he said. "We do, but it's in the blood. Makes a difference, you know."

"Oh, I don't know," Phil said. He noticed that Mr. Lowther was striding away. "It's a pretty game. I understand you're from Chicago. Used to live there myself."

"Really?"

"Yes. And I believe there's another Chicagoan around, not connected with the club." Phil stared at Car-

sen blankly. "Fellow by the name of Beach. Ed Beach. Know him?"

Carsen's stare was just as blank as Phil's, but somehow more courteous. "Beach?" he said. "Beach? Don't recall the name at all."

A bell rang at the ladies' clubhouse. Carsen caught Phil's inquiring look and explained: "Time for luncheon. The game will adjourn for an hour. By the way, in case you don't know, luncheon is served outside the ladies' clubhouse. I'll take you over."

Phil went with Carsen. He thought perhaps he'd have a chance to see Lucile, even if she wouldn't speak to him. He might also get a look at the man who had hired her, Bellowe. Another man he wanted to see was that popular cricket player, Ted Latta, in whose honor this game was being played.

But first he met a woman.

CHAPTER III

SHE was just emerging from the ladies' clubhouse. Phil guessed her at somewhere between thirty-five and forty. She was dark, and rather frail. Obviously, she had been a great beauty. She still had a lot of it, but her features now were thin rather than delicate—thin lips, especially. The thin lips seemed to add to the intensity of the glowing eyes.

Carsen stopped. This man, Phil thought, has lost some of his calm. The woman smiled.

Carsen said: "Hello, Mildred. I'd hoped to lunch with you."

"Well, can't you?"

"Sorry, no. Got to talk over the blasted finances." Carsen suddenly remembered Phil. "Oh, Mrs. Seymour, Mr. Massen. Mr. Massen is finding out about cricket, Mildred. Perhaps you'll help him."

Mrs. Seymour's eyes clouded. Phil watched her. He felt as if he had unexpectedly touched a live spot in the case. Obviously, this man Carsen was gaga about Mrs. Seymour. That was easy to understand. She was a widow,

of course, or perhaps a divorcee. But it wasn't so clear how Mrs. Seymour felt about Carsen.

Of one thing Phil was sure. If Mrs. Seymour really wanted Carsen, she'd get him—or else!

Then Mrs. Seymour smiled at Phil. "Delighted," she said.

Reluctantly, Carsen moved away. Phil was alone with Mrs. Seymour. And presently he was sitting on a bench with her, munching sandwiches which someone had handed him. People were milling around in an easy informal way, a thoroughly well-mannered way. It was hard to be an investigator in this atmosphere. It was even hard to remember that poor old Henderson was dead, over there in that toolhouse. It was especially hard, with Mrs. Seymour sitting rather close. Phil thought he'd feel a little guilty if Lucile should walk past and see him.

Then Lucile *did* walk past with Bellowe, but appeared not to notice him. Phil watched them furtively. Lucile went into the ladies' clubhouse. Bellowe hurried on toward the gents' clubhouse.

Phil heard Mrs. Seymour's low laugh. She said: "If you'd prefer coffee, perhaps I can get some for you."

Phil grunted and looked at his cup. He was drinking tea. "No thanks. I'll down this stuff. It won't hurt me—much. I'm—"

"Hello, Ted!"

For a moment, Mrs. Seymour had forgotten Phil. She had called to the tawny-haired cricketer, and Ted Latta came over, hesitated, sat with them. He handled his cup of tea like a veteran. He was pleasant-featured, and there was a queer quiet vitality about him. It was easy to like him, Phil thought; it would be especially easy for a woman.

The sudden livening of the air almost made Phil sniff.

Mrs. Seymour said casually: "Mr. Latta, Mr. Massen. Mr. Massen is learning about cricket from us, Ted."

TED LATTA smiled agreeably, and Phil said: "I was watching you, Mr. Latta. Saw you make a nice catch. Wonder it didn't crack your hand open, not wearing any glove."

Mrs. Seymour made a little sound in her throat, like a gasp that got caught halfway. But then she smiled.

"Ted is used to it," she said.

"Yes, you get used to it," agreed Latta. "It stings a little, that's all. Something in the way you do it, too. You make the catch with an away-from-the-ball motion."

"Something like baseball," said Phil. "But it was nice work. Say, I saw you talking to a guy I've seen somewhere."

Latta said: "Who?"

"His name's Bellowe. He has a girl with him."

"Bellowe?" said Latta. "Oh, yes. Bellowe and his sister."

"From St. Louis, aren't they?"

"Yes."

"Know them pretty well?"

Ted Latta said: "In a way. I've never been to St. Louis, and Bellowe has never been here before. His brother, Paul, went to Oxford when I did, years ago."

"You mean," Phil said, "you knew about Paul's brother and sister, but never saw them before?"

"Not before today." Latta was quite placid about it, but Mrs. Seymour moved a little. Latta said: "That reminds me. I told Bellowe I'd meet him in the clubhouse for a drink."

Mrs. Seymour did not watch Ted Latta as he strode away, and Phil said: "Nice fellow, that Ted Latta."

"Ted?" she said indifferently. "Oh, yes. Good fielder. Very good batsman, too."

"How do things stand now?" inquired Phil.

Mrs. Seymour glanced across at the scoreboard alongside the scoring box. She said: "It shows that the Tunbridge Green eleven have scored 173 runs for eight wickets. Eight men out, two more wickets to fall."

"But I thought there were eleven to a side?"

"There are. But, as you may have noticed, there are two men at bat at the same time, one at each wicket. When the tenth man is out, the eleventh is out automatically."

"Like a man left on base," suggested Phil.

"Much the same."

"It shouldn't take very long," Phil said, "to get two more men out, should it?"

"Probably not. The bottom of the batting list is usually weak. The Tunbridge eleven will no doubt be through with their inning fifteen or twenty minutes after lunch. Then, after half an hour's intermission, Woodford Wells will go to bat."

Phil said: "I suppose Ted Latta will take his turn early?"

"No," said Mrs. Seymour, "Ted is our best batsman, but he's put half-way down the list, so that he can start a rally if necessary."

"Like baseball?"

"Quite."

WELL, that would mean that Ted Latta would not be going to bat for about two hours—perhaps, after lunch—and most of that time he would be idle, nothing to do. Mrs. Seymour had been helpful. But Phil felt that the woman was not as quiet, inside of her, as her manner. There was something stirring in her, all right.

Mrs. Seymour leaned back, and Phil knew that she was taking a sustained look at him. Her voice came to him quietly: "Are you really so interested in this game? I mean, are you anxious to stay for the finish?"

"Oh, not especially," Phil said.

"Good!" She leaned forward again. "I came out with Ted Latta, but I do want to get back to town. Would it be asking too much of you to drive me in—now?"

"It might be a good idea," said Phil.

Yes, it might be a good idea. Mrs.

Seymour wanted to get him away from here. And Phil thought it might be better if Mrs. Seymour was away from there, so she couldn't talk to anyone else. They got up and walked away. Phil wondered if Lucile was around and could see him. Anyhow, it probably wouldn't make any difference to her—not now.

They reached Phil's car. Phil knew this country between here and town pretty well. He drove toward town, but took a side road. Mrs. Seymour didn't seem to mind. He ran out of gas at a spot well out in the country. That was pretty old, but he couldn't think of a new one at the moment.

"Why, Mr. Massen!" murmured Mrs. Seymour.

"Sorry," Phil said, taking his keys. "I think there's a filling station a mile or two across country. I'll walk it. You just stay here."

Mrs. Seymour pouted, but said nothing.

Phil walked across country. There was a filling station. He knew the lad who operated it.

He said: "Harry, let me use your car."

"Sure," said the young man.

Phil drove back to the cricket grounds.

The Tunbridge Green eleven were out now. The members of both teams were loafing during the intermission. Phil stood in the small open field near the entrance which was used as a parking lot and surveyed the buildings. He observed again that the only building which was at all secluded was the toolhouse, with that group of willows surrounding it. There were no other trees on the grounds, except for a line of willows which ran thinly from the back of the toolhouse past the backs of the clubhouses.

Then he saw Ed Beach.

The little plumber was squatting on the ground, off by himself, near the scoreboard. Phil recalled that Beach was supposed to be watching Roger Bellowe. He was watching, all right, but not Bellowe. Beach's vest-

button eyes were on Ted Latta, and Latta was just entering the gents' clubhouse with the cricket captain from Chicago, Carsen.

Phil could see Bellowe, too. He was with Lucile, near the ladies' clubhouse. It would be nice, Phil thought, to ask Bellowe a few questions, but he knew they wouldn't be answered. It would also be nice to do certain other things to Bellowe, like taking him apart, inch by inch.

Phil approached Beach from behind and said: "What's doing?"

"Huh?" Beach looked up, startled. "Aw, it's you. Why, nothing."

PHIL MASSEN squatted beside the little plumber. "You haven't found out why Carsen wants you to watch Bellowe?" he asked curiously.

"Naw."

Phil said confidentially: "Well, I've got an idea about that!"

Beach's knees jerked. "Huh!"

"Yes, sir. I've been nosing around, Beach. You were right. Carsen's up to something! There's a lot of dough involved in this game!"

"Dough!"

"About fifty thousand bucks!" Phil told the little man about the wager between the two clubs. "See how it is? Say, one of them makes three hundred runs and the other only two hundred, that means the losing team has to dig up ten thousand bucks more than the winning team!"

Ed Beach was excited. He stuck his knuckles into his mouth. But he was puzzled, too, and in a few moments he removed his hand and said: "Well, I heard something about that bet, but nobody figures— Say, you mean maybe Carsen is trying to get someone on the home team to throw the game?"

"Could be."

"Fifty thousand bucks!" muttered Beach.

"There are things going on," Phil said. "Wish I could follow it, but I've got to blow. Call from the office."

"What things?"

"Well, there's a little room at the back of the gents' clubhouse. From what I overheard, Carsen and that fellow Latta went in there just now to talk things over! Well, I've got to move. See you later, maybe."

Phil walked back to the parking field, then cut quickly across a tennis court to the rear of the gents' clubhouse. No one here, but there wasn't much cover. Phil made use of a tree trunk. Maybe there was a room at the rear of the clubhouse, but if there was, Phil reflected, there was no way of looking into it. But others wouldn't know any more about that than he had. He had to stand straight and still for nearly fifteen minutes. Then a man edged cautiously around the corner.

Phil stepped out briskly. He said pleasantly: "I figure you for the kind of a guy who couldn't keep away from a crooked deal, if he thought there was one around."

The man called Roger Bellowe went for his gun. It was, Phil thought, a dopey thing to do, but this fellow was getting jittery. Phil didn't give him a chance. It was a hard and nicely placed blow under the right ear. The way Bellowe's head cracked against the ground helped. He was almost stunned, but not quite, and his mouth worked a little, so Phil sat on his face while he went through his pockets.

There were three or four envelopes, not very informative. One envelope, however, was a long one, unsealed, with no addressee's name on it. The printed return address in the corner was: JACK LOWE DETECTIVE SERVICE, CHICAGO. In the envelope was a sheet of paper on which had been drawn a map.

It was a map of the cricket grounds, showing the location of the buildings. A circle had been drawn around the toolhouse, and on the other side of the paper was a map of the interior of it.

SO, VERY probably, this so-called Roger Bellowe was really Jack Lowe, private detective. This map had been either mailed or handed to him, and he had put it into one of his own envelopes. If it came to that, perhaps the person who had drawn the map could be traced by the paper.

Phil got up. The man on the ground had one eye open. He should be all right in a few minutes, so Phil walked away.

He reached the back of the toolhouse without being observed. There was a good spot here; a tree within six feet of the door, and a rambling bush around the tree.

Phil backed into the bush.

He couldn't see anything of the playing field, but every few moments he heard the sharp tangy report of a ball coming off the offensive side of a cricket bat. He remembered that when he was a kid he could always hear the smack of a ball against a bat blocks away. It had always lifted his heart up several inches and made him want to race toward the game.

He couldn't race toward this game. He had to stay put. He thought there should be two men along, first one and then another.

The first came after half an hour. The man opened the door of the toolhouse and went in. Phil followed him fast and quietly. The man was looking down at Henderson.

Phil said in a whisper: "Pretty bad, huh?"

Ted Latta swung around. His face was flaming anger. His fists were balled and his elbows stiffened.

Phil slipped out an automatic. He said: "I shouldn't have to use this. Not on you. But I want you to do as I say. And keep quiet. Especially, keep quiet."

Latta's eyes pricked at Phil thoughtfully. He nodded.

Phil found a short sturdy stick. He heaved up the large front window and propped it up with the stick, securely. He picked up the rope which was attached to the top of the window and

stretched it across to the spike in the wall over the left corner window, and draped the rope over the spike.

Then he picked up the iron mallet and thrust the handle through the loop at the end of the rope, tightened it. The mallet hung free. The rope was stretched downwards, taut, just inside the window.

Latta was watching, and Phil said to him: "As I see it, you were coming in here to wait for someone. Now, I want you to do just what you would have done if nothing had interrupted that arrangement."

Silently, Ted Latta reflected. Then he moved to the front window and stood looking out. His hands rested on the inner window sill.

Phil said: "Hold that. And wait there. Keep quiet."

Latta held the position and kept quiet for some time. Phil was behind a big box. When the hand appeared at the small left window, there was practically no noise. The hand held a knife. The knife sliced the rope, and the iron mallet dropped sharply to the floor.

Noiselessly, Phil stepped forward, pushed Latta away from the front window, yanked the stick out from under the window. The window crashed down.

Phil raced to the door, opened it and ran out. A small figure was darting away, along the line of trees. Phil's legs were longer and he pounced.

Ed Beach got a gun from his pocket, but Phil cracked it out of his hand. Ed Beach, from Chi, started to whimper.

Ted Latta came up. Phil told him: "Go get Mr. Lowther."

CHAPTER IV

TED LATTA came back in a few moments with Mr. Lowther, who stared down at Beach as if he were looking at a dead rat that someone had dropped on his dining room table

beside the dessert. Phil motioned and they all re-entered the toolhouse.

Mr. Lowther's imperial face was grim. He indicated Beach. "Did this fellow do for poor Henderson?"

"In a way," Phil said.

"Nonsense!" snapped Mr. Lowther. "Either he did or he—"

"We'd better get back of this," Phil cut in. "I think the reason for all this was Latta's going away to England."

"Aren't you a little out of line there?" Latta objected.

"No. I think someone wanted to keep you here." Phil looked at Latta. "Do you know of anyone who would want to prevent your going to war, for either business or political reasons?"

Latta thought a moment. "No."

"Okay. Then it had to be a personal motive. A strong personal motive. Logically, that means a woman!" Latta didn't say anything but his eyes blinked. Phil went on: "I'll talk plainly. I mean Mrs. Seymour!"

"Good heavens!" said Mr. Lowther.

Phil said: "As I see it this man from Chicago, Carsen, is wacky about Mrs. Seymour, but she wants Ted Latta. And she's the kind of a woman who wants what she wants and there's nothing she won't do to get it. Well, if Latta went to England, she'd lose him. She was evidently having a hard time selling him on the idea—*her* idea—anyway. And if he went to war she'd probably never see him again.

"Now, the fate of nations wouldn't mean a darn thing to her in a case like this. She'd be set on keeping him around. But how could she do it, short of killing him? Well, she might cripple him!"

"Somehow, I'm not surprised," murmured Mr. Lowther.

Phil went on: "There are two or three things that show the scheme was worked by someone who knows Latta well. Mrs. Seymour fits in well here. Evidently she goes to Chicago

often—her acquaintance with Carsen shows that—so she gets a Chicago shamus named Jack Lowe to do the job for her. Mrs. Seymour tells him about Latta's friendship with Roger Bellowe's brother, at Oxford, so he comes here as Roger Bellowe. There's supposed to be a sister, so he takes care of that, too."

Ted Latta smiled a little. "She is a beauty," he said, "no matter whose sister she is."

Phil said: "He also brings along this little weasel, Beach, to do the mechanical work. Well, when Lowe gets out here, he introduces himself and the girl to Latta, who is delighted, especially with the girl. In the natural course of events, Latta wants to make a date with the girl. She tells him he'll have to see her brother about it. So, at lunch time, Latta meets Lowe for a drink, and Lowe tells him that the girl will talk to him after lunch, at the toolhouse."

"Why the toolhouse?" queried Mr. Lowther.

"Mrs. Seymour's idea again," Phil said. "It's the only really secluded spot on the grounds. Nowhere else could a man meet a lady unobserved. I imagine Latta has met other ladies there. In fact, it's likely that he's met Mrs. Seymour herself here."

The young man said: "I can't discuss that."

PHIL grinned. "It wouldn't be cricket, huh? Well, it's a safe bet. And Mrs. Seymour would know just how Latta would act while waiting. She would know that he'd wait there at the front window—with his hands on the window sill. And *they* are what Mrs. Seymour was after!"

Ted Latta stared incredulously. "My hands?" he said.

"Sure. If your hands are busted up, there won't be any talk of your leaving for England for a long time. So Beach here fixes up a little rig, crude, simple—but effective. He cuts the side cord of the front window, so it won't stay up unsupported. Then he

provides a support for it by tying a rope to a nail in the top of the window, stretching the rope across to that other side window and hanging it over a spike. To the end of the rope he attaches a heavy iron mallet. So now you get the picture!

"Latta is standing at the window, hands on the sill. Beach comes to the other window, outside, and cuts the rope. The mallet drops and the window support is gone. The window slams down on the back of Latta's hands. And to make sure of doing a beautiful job, nails have been driven into the window frame so that the points project down under. The result will be to mess up the hands pretty badly."

"Fiendish!" muttered Mr. Lowther. "But how about Henderson?"

"Simple accident," Phil said. "One that could easily happen. The poor old guy came in here for a rake. The rake is a long-handled thing and clumsy to handle. He turns around with the rake in his hand and it catches the rope over the spike and that turns the mallet loose. The iron head swoops across and snaps him against the temple."

Mr. Lowther reached out a well-aged but still vigorous hand and clutched Ed Beach by the neck. He demanded: "Is this true?"

"I ain't talking," Beach said sullenly.

"He's shy," Phil Massen said. "By the way Beach, it was your shamus friend who told you to buy me a drink and give me that yarn about watching him for Carsen. The idea was to take my attention away from him. Right?"

Beach said: "I still ain't talking."

Phil turned to Mr. Lowther. "Maybe," he said, "I was wrong about Henderson's death being an accident. Maybe, after all, it was murder! We could make a good case. The rope and nails and stuff would trace back to Beach, of course. We could prove by footprints and fingerprints that Beach had been here earlier. We

know he was here just now, because we caught him. Someone really should burn for poor old—"

"Okay, okay," whined Beach. "I know when I'm stuck. Sure, it's the way you got it doped. But that way you got nothing on me. I ain't done nothing you can take me for."

Mr. Lowther smiled sourly. "I think we can fix up some sort of medicine for you—but not as bitter as you deserve. Defacing private property will do to start with. And your mere presence constitutes a public nuisance."

Phil said: "I'll have to notify the office." He brought out steel bracelets, used them on Beach, and used the rope to hitch him to a post. "It might be good for him to be left alone with Henderson for a while."

Mr. Lowther and Ted Latta agreed, and they left the toolhouse, walked toward the gents' clubhouse.

Mr. Lowther said: "There's not much we can do, I'm afraid, to this private detective fellow, Jack Lowe."

"Maybe not," Phil agreed.

"And the girl who was working with him, passing herself off as his sister," Mr. Lowther went on. "She's culpable, morally, but that's all. I might be able to develop some minor charge—"

"There they are!" cut in Latta.

JACK LOWE, alias Roger Bellowe, was walking fast. He had Lucile by the arm. They were hurrying toward his car. Phil reached the car first, a second or two ahead of the others.

Jack Lowe's streamlined face was somewhat bruised, but it made a half smile. "So you're the law!" he said to Phil. "Okay. But the lady and I are leaving. You got nothing to stop us with."

"A dead man," said Phil, "is enough to stop anyone."

Lowe's smile faded into the bruises. "A dead man! I don't know anything about any stiff."

Phil was looking, for a moment.

at Lucile. Her eyes were very bright, and her color deepened.

"You're being just mean," she said with quiet anger. "Just making a personal issue of it."

"Young lady, you're in bad company, and you're probably just as evil as your company." Mr. Lowther was courteous, even when he was being hard. "Mr. Massen is right. There is a dead man in the toolhouse. He was a workingman, poor, but he was a sportsman and a man of honor. He was killed as an incident in a vicious scheme to commit a cruel crime—a scheme in which you had a part."

Phil was still watching Lucile. Yes, she knew now. Mr. Lowther was very convincing. She was looking beautiful, but she was looking pretty sad, too.

Phil laughed. He said: "Okay, Lucile. We can drop the curtain now. The show's over!"

For a moment the silence was profound, and Mr. Lowther said: "Just what do you mean, sir?"

"Lucile is an old sidekick of mine," said Phil. "She tips me off when anything comes her way that looks shady."

"You mean," said Mr. Lowther, "this young lady has been working with you?"

"Of course. How else could I have run this thing down?"

Mr. Lowther said: "Splendid!" The old gentleman looked quite relieved. "I don't see how I could have associated such beauty with an ugly enterprise." He turned to Ted Latta, reprovingly. "You should have known better, too, Ted."

Ted Latta chuckled. "So far as I'm concerned," he said, "the beauty carries its own pardon."

Phil turned just as Jack Lowe made a dash for his car. Phil caught up with him. Lowe swung about and a gun was coming out of his pocket. Phil swung fast. The contact sounded like the crack of a hard-hit ball.

"Dear Lord!" murmured Mr. Lowther, admiringly. "What a sockdologer!"

Phil said: "I feel better myself now. Maybe you've got a place in the clubhouse where we can lock him up for a while."

Mr. Lowther cheerfully helped Phil pick up Jack Lowe, and they lugged him toward the clubhouse, leaving Lucile with Ted Latta.

When Phil came back, Lucile and Latta were sitting cozily on a bench. Phil was uneasy about that. This man Latta carried plenty of appeal for the women, without half trying. And it wasn't likely Lucile had forgiven Phil, either. It had always been her inflexible rule that Phil had no business interfering, and if she made a mistake she'd take the rap for it.

Lucile said: "Mr. Latta has been telling me things. By the way, what happened to Mrs. Seymour?"

Phil told them where Mrs. Seymour was.

Ted Latta laughed. "I'll drive out and get her after the game. Be good for her to wait. Only trouble with her is she's been spoiled all her life."

MR. LOWTHER came up and dropped a hand on Latta's shoulder. "We're not doing so well," he said. "Score is only 77 for five wickets. You'll be in next. You'll have to pull us out. Make it a century."

"A century?" Phil queried.

"A hundred runs," explained Mr. Lowther.

"One man make a hundred runs?"

"It happens sometimes," Mr. Lowther said tolerantly. "But not frequently. Ted can do it, if he gets a good start. You see, one reason so many more runs are scored in cricket than in baseball is that the pitch is in the center of the field and the batsman can hit it all around him—no such thing as a ball hit foul. The fielders have a lot more territory to cover.

"And when the fielders are unable to prevent the ball from reaching the field boundary, it automatically counts four runs. If the batsman hits the ball out of the field, it counts six. Ah!" Mr. Lowther looked up sudden-

ly. "Frank is out. In you go, Ted!"

Ted Latta reached down lazily and picked his bat off the ground. He got up. He said to Lucile: "Well, I think I still have a claim on you. A man who was acting as your agent promised me an engagement with you!"

"Well, here, now," Phil put in. "I don't think—well it's up to Lucile."

Latta stared at him. Then he smiled again. "Oh, I see. It's more than business between you two!" He shrugged. "I'm sorry—but my blessing on you."

He sauntered out on the field.

Lucile said in a low voice: "Phil, I've been thinking about my kid sister. I want to do what's right by Beatrice. But maybe I've been wrong. I don't want to spoil her. Maybe it would be better if she suffered a little, while she's young, than grow up to be another Mrs. Seymour!"

Phil beamed with quick happiness. "Oh, well," he said, "she wouldn't need to suffer so much. I'd be a good brother. Maybe she'd like it."

"Maybe she would," Lucile said, and caressed the back of Phil's hand.

They watched the playing field. Ted Latta had reached the wicket, was facing the bowler. The bowler shot the ball at him, with the regular straight-arm overhead motion. It was a terrifically fast ball. Ted Latta seemed to step forward to meet it, briskly. His bat swept at it smartly, lifted it off the ground.

"Beautiful!" exclaimed Mr. Lowther.

"The guy's good," Phil conceded. He squirmed uneasily, and said to Lucile: "Say, there's something makes me feel bad. That guy's going to war in a few days. Now, if I was in his place, and he was in my place, and I figured I was entitled to a date with you, what would he do? Why, he would be very polite and say, 'Certainly! Of course! By all means!'"

Lucile said: "Listen, you lug. I don't want you to be *too* good a sport. Cricket is swell—but you leave it to the English."

Playgirl of Destiny

By
Lee E. Wells



The gorgeous blindfolded captive who had been held for ransom could give Investigator Lillard only one slight clue as to her abductors' hangout. And when Lillard followed that clue he learned that his footsteps were leading him to a suicide stake-out.

THE bright headlamps of the yellow cab passed the sign: Paradine—City Limits. Jim Lillard leaned forward, his guileless blue eyes on the bright glow against the night sky ahead.

His voice was gentle. "Is that Blue Hills?"

White gleamed brightly in an ebony face as the cabby grinned and nodded. "That's her, boss. Them lights spell money—in hunks."

The headlights flicked briefly across a dirt road that led off to the left. Jim caught the gleam of dark metal and the sparkle of glass—a parked car. He

twisted his slight frame around to stare out the rear window.

The cabby fished for a cigarette and his eyes rolled up to the rear-vision mirror. The car pulled out of the lane onto the highway behind them, its lights blinding.

"That's Lovers' Lane, boss. We musta scared the sweet romance out of some one."

Jim didn't answer. In the glow of the approaching headlights his smooth, fresh face had lost some of its youthful qualities. His eyes slitted and his hand slipped inside his coat. That car was coming too fast. His nerves tingled with a definite warning.

The cabby swung over to let the low, black car pass. "Y'all gonna stay with Mr. Shenckl, boss? He done had some trouble lately."

The car was alongside. Jim Lillard had a fleeting glimpse of the hulking driver. His eyes shot toward the back seat. The window was down and he couldn't see anyone. Then he caught the gleam of metal as a thin round barrel protruded.

Jim threw himself against the front seat. His long arms shot out across the cabby's shoulder and he viciously wrenched the wheel to the right. Gunfire blasted into the peaceful night and orange-red flames flicked spitefully from the car ahead. The windshield shattered in a spray of glass. There was the deadly whine of lead raking the length of the cab.

It swung off the road, plunged into the shallow ditch. It bounced out, heeled over and ran several yards on two wheels. A rail fence splintered against its impact. A tire blew with a flat, smacking sound and the muddy furrows of the field slowed the cab's speed. It rocked to a halt, miraculously right side up.

Jim picked himself off the floor and wrenched open the door. He jumped out, the heavy automatic springing into his hand from the shoulder holster. Down the highway, the taillight of the black car winked out as it

roared away. Jim stared after it, remembering the license number he had automatically read. Gradually his full lips lost their fighting compression. He turned to the cab.

The cabby wasn't in sight. Jim opened the door. A giant bulk quivered and shook, trying hard to push itself under the dash. Jim shook the cabby. "It's over. They're gone."

Slowly, suspiciously, long arms and legs unfolded. The man sat up, his eyes still rolling in fright. He wiped beads of cold sweat from his black forehead.

"Boss-man, some one sure ain't got no use for you at all!"

Jim thoughtfully replaced his gun. "Who?"

The cabby quickly shook his bullet head. "Unh-uh! Don't ask me, boss. I ain't craving to know!"

JIM surveyed the cab. The windshield showed only a few shreds of shattered glass. A deadly line of little jagged holes ran the length of the body, and Jim wondered how he and the cabby had escaped death in the leaden hail. The rear tire had blown half off the rim and the mud of the field oozed up over the wheel.

The cabby scratched his head and his thick underlip lowered. "Boss, there sits my living and I ain't got more'n three dollars to my name."

"Have the cab fixed and send the bill to me," Jim Lillard replied. He turned, facing the distant lights. "Take me to the Shenckl home. I'll call the police."

"That's sweet music to me, boss. Come on, I'll show y'all the way."

They tramped directly across the fields toward the swank suburb of Blue Hills. Half an hour later, Jim waited impatiently while the gateman called the big house, still hidden by the trees of the parklike grounds.

The old man nodded to Jim. "You go right up the drive, Mr. Lillard. Mr. Shenckl will be waiting."

Jim turned to the cabby. "Wait for me, Mr.—Mr.—"

"Tilly, boss, and don't let the name fool you. I ain't feminine." He pushed out his barrel chest and his teeth flashed. Jim's blue eyes crinkled in silent laughter as he walked up the drive.

Jim could see Mr. Bradley Shenckl pacing up and down before the brightly lighted rectangle of the mansion's wide doors. At the crunching sound of Jim's footsteps on the gravel drive, the man turned and hurried down the steps.

He was tall, with a loose-jointed gauntness that reminded Jim of Abe Lincoln. His face was as severe as a dyspeptic Puritan's and his dark eyes sat deep under ridges of bone. His nose was a jutting challenge, relieved by the soft smiling lips and the cultured voice.

He extended a large hand at the end of a gangling arm. "I've been waiting for you, Mr. Lillard. I can't understand why the insurance company should send an investigator."

"Routine," Jim answered shortly. "I'd like to use your phone. I was attacked on the way out."

Shenckl drew back and genuine shock sounded in his voice. "Attacked! But who—"

"I intend to find out," Jim said flatly. "Now if I could use the phone, Mr. Shenckl."

The big man turned abruptly and led the way into the house. He turned off the hall into a rich paneled library, lined to the high ceiling with books. He awkwardly motioned to a giant desk, covered with a mound of papers that half buried the squat, black hand-phone.

He remained within earshot as Jim placed the call. Jim was brief and explicit in his description of the attack and asked that the police contact him at the Shenckl estate. He replaced the phone and faced Bradley Shenckl behind the desk.

Under the lights the man's face looked more gaunt than ever. The deep-set eyes stared disbelievingly. "This was a peaceful place, Mr. Lil-

lard. Then my niece was kidnaped—and now an attempt was made on your life. I can't understand it."

Jim sank into one of the deep leather chairs with a sigh of relief. Reaction rode him hard and all of his muscles ached. He passed his slim hand over his eyes to brush the fog away. "You have placed a claim with the Commerce Casualty Company, Mr. Shenckl, in the amount of \$100,000."

Shenckl sat deeper in his chair. "That's right. It's the cash I had to pay the desperadoes who kidnaped my niece."

"That's a large sum, Mr. Shenckl. Naturally, the company would like to recover if possible. I have been sent to investigate independently of local authorities and the FBI. You marked the ransom bills?"

Shenckl's chin set stubbornly. "No, Mr. Lillard. The ransom note warned against such an action. I wanted Ruth back alive."

FOR a brief second Jim was angry, but his smooth face resumed its blandness. "You were too frightened, Mr. Shenckl. Has there been any clue as to the identity of the kidnapers?"

Shenckl picked up the phone. "I'll have my niece down. She'll be able to tell you all you want to know." He spoke briefly into the phone and then leaned back in his chair. He rubbed his crooked fingers along his square chin.

His soft voice was hesitant. "There is something I feel I should tell you, though my niece is quite certain I'm wrong about this man. It's her friend, Paul Walker."

Jim looked up, his blue eyes round. "What about him?"

Shenckl kept his eyes on the far wall. "Walker is a handsome fellow, too handsome. He doesn't have any money and when Ruth comes of age, she will inherit my brother's fortune. I don't like to hint—" His voice died away.

Jim was helpful. "Fortune hunter?" he asked softly.

"Bluntly, yes. Walker and I have seriously disagreed on several matters and I had forbidden Ruth to see him. Walker can't set foot on these grounds. My gateman has seen him several times, and—"

He broke off abruptly as the girl came into the room. Jim snapped up from his chair. She was that kind of a girl, tall and slim, her body beautifully molded in the close fitting black evening gown.

Jim's eyes dwelt for a long second on the low-cut bodice and then traveled up to the oval face with the pointed chin and the direct, blue-gray eyes. Her golden blonde hair framed her face and neck in a deep-waved hair arrangement that was arresting and decidedly becoming to her unusual type of beauty. Her face showed definite traces of Bradley Shenckl's bony gauntness, yet softened and rounded.

"My niece, Ruth Miller. Mr. Lillard is from the insurance company. He thought you might have some clue—"

Her face lengthened and the crimson lips had a pout of distaste. "Again, Uncle Bradley?"

Jim shrugged. "I'm really sorry, Miss Miller, but there may be some little thing you forgot to tell before."

She sank into a chair and crossed her long legs. "Very well, what do you want to know?"

The butler appeared at the door, dark and haughty. "The police, Mr. Bradley, about Mr. Lillard's—er—accident."

There were two of them, palpably plain-clothes from the heavy round faces to the large feet in regulation black shoes. They were uncomfortable before Shenckl, and their voices were brusque. Ruth's face showed sudden fright as Jim described the attack. She leaned forward, hanging onto his words.

The detectives were plainly puzzled. "This cabby didn't push himself on you?"

Jim laughed. "No, Tilly was sound asleep with a paper over his face. I

had to shake him hard to wake him up."

"No help there," the detective grunted. He frowned. "Now if you'd seen the license plate."

"I did," Jim answered. "68-410."

Ruth's eyes were round and her hand was clenched to her lips. She saw Jim's ingenuous stare and her eyes dropped. She blushed faintly.

The two officers finally left. Ruth sat white and statuesque. Casually, she asked for a cigarette and Jim extended his pack. Over the match, her eyes were direct and searching, weighing and judging him.

She exhaled and lazily reached for the telephone. Jim's fingers closed over her hand. "Best wait awhile, Miss Miller."

BRADLEY SHENCKL stared from one to the other, badly puzzled, his craggy brows drawn tight against his nose. Ruth's mouth curved disdainfully, but she still kept a grip on the phone. "Mayn't I use the phone in my own home?"

"Normally, yes. But not to call Mr. Paul Walker until the police have a chance to talk to him. His license number on the killer car was a shock, wasn't it?"

Her lovely jaw dropped in sheer surprise. Slowly her eyes clouded mistily, the softness quickly giving away to harsh anger. Her free hand came up in a blur of motion, and Jim felt the sting of her fingers across his face.

"Paul didn't do it!" she blazed. "You and uncle both want him out of the way!"

She pivoted on her high heels and rushed to the door, a slim distraught figure. Jim's cracking tone halted her. "I want to talk to you!" He could see that she was of a mind to disregard him, though she had stopped. Jim smiled softly. "If you want your friend cleared, you'd better give me the whole story—something I can work on."

He held a chair for her and waited.

The tension held between them, though Jim masked his with friendliness. Finally she came slowly back into the room and sank into the chair. Jim sighed inaudibly and unconsciously rubbed his smarting cheek. He turned to Bradley Shenckl.

"You've given most of the major points in your claim to the company. Miss Miller was kidnapped from the grounds—"

"The highway just beyond the gate," Shenckl corrected.

"No one saw her abducted. You received ransom notes and, against the advice of the authorities, paid the ransom in such a way that it would be difficult for them to trace the kidnapers. Miss Miller was gone for nine days. She was released, blindfolded, about a quarter of a mile from here." Jim swung to Ruth. "Is that right?"

"Yes," she answered. "I heard the car go away and I waited a few minutes. I couldn't believe that I had really been released. Then I jerked the tape from my eyes and came home."

Jim lit a cigarette with his slim fingers. "No idea where you were taken?" he asked.

"No. I know it was miles away. I couldn't say which direction. The men slapped the tape across my eyes the moment I was in the car." She said it in a tired tone, bored by an oft repeated tale.

"You saw the men?"

"Yes, one was big and burly with a black stubble all over his face. The other was smaller, with a mean, weasel face. He was the one who threatened Paul with the gun—"

"Paul Walker? He was with you?"

Jim wondered how the girl could pack so much contempt in a slight movement of red lips. "Yes, you may count that against him!"

Jim ignored the thrust. "You were blindfolded the whole time you were gone?" He sighed hopelessly when she nodded. "There was nothing that would tell you about the room, the house? Whether it was in a town or the country?"

"I couldn't see a thing," she stated flatly. "I couldn't hear any traffic."

Jim sank into his chair, crushing out his cigarette. "I guess that's all, Miss Miller. Thanks."

She arose, gave him a look that scorched right through him and left the room. Bradley Shenckl watched her go, then swung his gaunt face to Jim.

"Anything helpful?"

"Very little." Jim arose. "I'm too tired. If you'll loan me your car, I'll get back to Paradine. I need a hotel and a lot of sleep."

Shenckl reached for the phone. "I'll take care of everything, and reserve your room."

The car was a long black job that purred snootily down the highway. The chauffeur stared straight ahead, deliberately keeping his eyes from the talkative Tilly who sat beside him. Jim sagged in the back seat, his tired brain refusing to tackle the job. One thing stood out, even a dunderhead could see it. Ruth Miller was anxious, too anxious, to protect the unknown Paul Walker.

Walker was a fortune hunter, according to Bradley Shenckl, and Ruth as yet had no money of her own. Shenckl handled that for her. Jim wondered if Shenckl himself might not be a likely suspect; or, maybe, the plot was hatched between Walker and Ruth. A hundred thousand is a lot of dough, and a girl in love will do anything to keep her man. Jim Lillard sighed and allowed his head to drop in light slumber.

He arranged for Tilly's ride home, to the chauffeur's disgust, and fairly staggered to his hotel room. He smoked cigarette after cigarette, and then slipped wearily out of his clothing, pushed the heavy automatic under his pillow and crawled between the cool sheets. In an instant he was asleep.

IT WAS the light that bothered him. It seeped in below his eyelids so that he turned vainly to escape it.

Then his numbed brain realized that he had turned out the light before he had gone to sleep. His faculties snapped alert. He lay with eyes closed, his ears strained. There was no sound, but he sensed that some one was in the room. He chanced a look.

The voice was sardonic and edged. "Don't play doggo, snooper. Snap out of it!"

Jim looked up. He stared into the muzzle of a menacing pistol barrel, and noted that the finger was white in pressure against the trigger. Jim's eyes traveled up a cheap, gray suit, to a young and desperate face. The long jaw was clenched so tightly the muscles worked in a steady rolling motion beneath the skin. The lips were thin and tight and the nostrils of the straight nose flared in suppressed anger. The eyes were black and deep, with a dangerous glint. A good looking guy, Jim thought, if he wasn't so mad.

He slowly sat up, carefully keeping his hands above the covers. "You're Paul Walker," he said in a matter-of-fact tone and yawned. The man looked startled.

"Yes, I am. And you're the heel that Bradley Shenckl's using to put me away on a kidnaping charge."

Jim scratched his tousled head. "I wouldn't say that. Maybe I'm just trying to find out what really happened." He looked around and grinned at the angry young man. "Mind if I get my cigarettes?"

He didn't wait for consent. Slowly and carefully he pushed back the covers and swung his feet to the floor. He fished in his vest for the pack and matches and coolly lit a smoke while Paul Walker watched, the deadly flicker playing constantly in his eyes. Jim exhaled deeply.

"So I'm the big bad wolf, eh?"

Walker's voice was flat with certainty. "You're Bradley Shenckl's wolf. That mealy-mouthed bandit would do anything to keep me away from Ruth."

Jim leaned forward to empty his

ashes in a tray on the plain bureau. "You were with Ruth the night of the kidnaping."

"That proves nothing!" Walker said vehemently. For a brief instant the gun barrel wavered. Jim flung the full ash tray directly at Walker's head. Gray particles flew cloudlike into the man's face. He threw himself backward, stumbled, and clawed vainly at his eyes. Jim stepped in, catlike, and the edge of his hand cracked down on Walker's wrist. The gun flew from his fingers and bounced on the rug.

Jim had it. He sat down on the bed until Walker's wild motions stopped and he stood rubbing his eyes, his face smeared with tears and ashes. "Better sit down," Jim suggested. "I have you covered."

He guided Walker to a chair. "If you quit rubbing, your eyes will stop hurting in a little while."

Walker cursed bitterly. "Well, you've got me. Turn me over to the police."

"Why?" Jim asked.

The blinded, dirty face turned up in amazement. "You were anxious enough that you wouldn't let Ruth call to warn me."

"Oh, that. I thought the police should have an even break. I see she told you my room number." Jim's voice hardened. "You'd better answer some questions, Walker, and make the answers good. You were with Miss Miller when she was kidnaped?"

The man groaned. "That again! So what? We have dates, when she can slip away from that uncle of hers. I'm the fall guy because I happen to be with her."

Jim carefully placed the gun close beside him on the bed. "Not necessarily. Maybe you were unlucky. But how come I get shot at tonight from a car bearing your license plates? Two plus two, Mr. Walker, can sometimes equal a number of things."

WALKER tentatively blinked open his watery eyes. His voice was sullen. "It was my car! And the

police questioned me. I happened to be able to prove by my landlady that the car had been stolen not ten minutes before. The police let me go, but told me to hang around."

Jim picked up the gun, his blue eyes shrewd and distant. He studied Paul Walker. Take the muck of ashes and tears away and he'd be handsome enough. There was something square-cut and rugged about him, something in the hard set of his jaw that was definitely in his favor.

Walking to the phone, Jim called the police station. Walker started up out of his chair, but the gun made him change his mind. His face became sullen and dark, but he resumed his seat. Jim asked questions and listened, then hung up.

He returned to the bed. "Okay, it checks. But why did you come in here, threatening me?"

Walker looked sheepish. "I was mad clear through. Bradley Shenckl has given me enough pushing around. I figured you were his tool. I wanted to scare you out of town."

Jim considered the wide green stripe in his pajamas and his mind raced among the strange angles this case presented. He looked up from under his brows. "Are you in love with Ruth Miller?"

Walker's face changed. It lit up like a carnival midway and he started to talk. Then his lips quirked contemptuously.

"Why tell you? Everyone figures it's a play for Ruth's money."

"Is it?"

"Mister, ask that again and I'll bat down your teeth, gun or no gun!"

The detective hefted the gun in his hand. "I believe you would," he sighed. "Walker, you've got the neatest flock of weak answers and half-baked alibis I've met in a month of Sundays." He released the cartridge clip from the handle of the gun. "I represent an insurance company that don't give a rip if Uncle Bradley is a bad boy, or you're a gigolo making a play for the gal's bank account."

Walker's face tightened angrily, but Jim paid no attention. "I didn't either, until someone tried out a Tommy gun on me. That makes it personal. That makes the company and me have the same idea—get the guy that pulled the job. Maybe it's you, maybe someone else. I can say there's angles that make things look bad for you. Do we understand one another?"

The young man flushed. "Yes. But I didn't kidnap Ruth."

"All right, you didn't. So I take a chance you're telling the truth." Jim ejected the cartridge in the chamber and tossed the weapon to Walker. "Get going, and don't pull another stunt like this."

Walker pocketed the gun and pulled himself to his feet. He stared at Jim for a long moment and then walked to the door. He had it open when Jim stopped him.

"Fair warning, Walker. If I get proof enough to pin the job on you, I'll come after you. I won't be fooling."

"Fair enough," the young man answered. "Mind if I do some sleuthing on my own?"

"Help yourself." Jim generously waved his hand.

Walker was gone. For an hour Jim sat on the edge of the bed and smoked cigarettes, wondering if he'd been a damned fool.

For three days Jim had Tilly drive him around the countryside in a rented car. He might as well have spent his time in the hotel room. He didn't see a spot that would make a likely hideout. There was no report of strangers in the countryside, of men who could have been Ruth's abductors. He had drawn an absolute blank and the company wouldn't like it.

The fourth morning Jim had the giant, lazy negro drive him out to the Shenckl estate. Bradley was as gaunt and soft spoken as ever and readily called Ruth at Jim's request.

She came into the library, saw Jim, and stopped short. Her soft face showed disgust.

"You again?"

"Yes, me again. Mind if we go over the kidnaping once more? Make sure there isn't some little thing you've forgotten."

IT WAS pretty hopeless. She answered readily enough and truthfully. There was nothing tangible, just impressions. Jim patiently started again from the beginning.

"You didn't hear the sound of a wagon or an automobile?" he insisted. "No sound that would mean a bridge the kidnap car crossed?"

Ruth shook her head. "Nothing." Then her eyes widened, and she spoke slowly, uncertainly. "There was something, but it couldn't help."

Jim leaned forward. "Give, sister! Who knows?"

She shot him a startled glance. "Well, every day at about the same hour I heard an airplane motor. It went directly overhead. I began to wait for it. You know how you'd feel blindfolded and frightened."

"Sure," Jim agreed. "Anything else?"

"One day I didn't hear it. Then the next day it came again and regularly thereafter. That's all, Mr. Lillard, absolutely all."

"Okay, and thanks."

She left haughtily. When she was gone, Shenckl spoke up from behind the desk. "Anything important, Mr. Lillard?"

"Slim pickings, frankly."

Bradley Shenckl sighed. "I'm afraid so. I still think Paul Walker would bear deeper investigation."

Jim picked up his hat and his cherubic face held a woebegone expression. "I'll do what I can, Mr. Shenckl. See you again."

His shoulders held a hopeless droop as he walked from the house and down the drive. Tilly waited for him in the rented car, sound asleep. It took a full minute for Jim to shake him to life. They drove away at a crawling pace, Tilly yawning broadly over the wheel,

Around the first bend of the road, Jim leaned forward.

"Isn't Marsden the division point for Air Lines?"

Tilly yawned and smacked his lips. "Sure is, boss. They got a big airfield there."

Jim's eyes glittered. "Tilly, if you don't break all records getting there, I'll part those black ringlets with a gun butt!"

Tilly snapped awake. "Yes, sir, boss-man! Grab hold of somethin', for I aims to fly."

They reached Marsden, but Jim was breathless. After the car skidded to a stop, he had to sit very still for a minute to make sure he was all in one piece. He climbed from the car and entered the airport office.

The manager was very helpful. "I believe one of our flights did make a detour about that time. Bad weather. Let's look at the records."

He banged open a file drawer and his well-manicured fingers flew over tabs and then pulled out a sheet. His voice was triumphant.

"There! Flight Six. Bad electrical storm centering eighty miles south of Paradine. The Flight detoured down Green Valley to Hemington that day."

Jim's blue eyes looked excited. "Charter me a plane and a pilot right now. I want to make Number Six's exact schedule flight."

Jim hurried out to the car. Tilly was asleep again, his wide mouth agape, his white ivories gleaming in the mid-day sun. Jim shook him roughly, and Tilly slowly came back to consciousness with a series of snorts and grunts.

"Wake up, big boy, we're going to take an airplane joy ride."

Tilly looked uncertain, but he unwrapped his long legs from the steering post and pushed himself from the car. "I done 'bout everything, boss-man, but I ain't figured on flying till I got beyond them Pearly Gates."

"If you keep awake you'll be able to tell St. Peter you've got a student license. Let's go."

THEY met a slim, brisk young man who proved to be regular co-pilot of Flight Six. In ten minutes they were up in the air and headed south. Tilly sat behind Jim, his eyes shut until they leveled off. Then he cautiously opened one frightened orb and looked out the window. Jim gave instructions to the pilot.

In a few minutes the pilot pointed down and gave a signal showing Flight Six had started the detour here. Jim kept his eyes glued to the ground far below. They came over a series of low hills that rolled on in a mass of tumbled, crazy hummocks of green, the dark green of pines. There were houses, but none that looked in the least suspicious.

Then he saw it, a clearing in which squatted a small shack, peeling for lack of paint. Lazy smoke curled in a pencil line from the chimney and only a winding, rutted, single track road led to the clearing—and stopped. On Jim's order the pilot circled once and headed back for Marsden.

Jim lost no time in returning to Paradine and the Shenckl estate. He met Bradley Shenckl and Ruth walking across the broad lawn, and he didn't stand on ceremony.

"Miss Miller, on your ride with the kidnapers, did you have a sense of going through hills, an up and down road? Did you smell pine smoke then, or later in the place where they kept you?"

Her eyes were wide in surprise. "Yes, I did! Particularly the pine smoke smell."

Jim relaxed, smiling. Bradley Shenckl was curious. "You've got a lead?"

"Definitely! I'm making a call after dark tonight." He left Ruth Miller and her gaunt uncle in stunned surprise.

Tilly called at the hotel that night and the rented car started south at a good clip. Jim checked his gun, and then made himself comfortable in the back seat. In a short time they came into the hills and Jim became more

alert. Tilly switched on the headlights and Jim watched the side roads.

"Turn here," he said at last, and Tilly groaned at the sight of the horrible road they faced. Jim checked with a map the airport manager had given him and sat back, satisfied. They drove slowly, fighting the ruts and rocks. Jim watched the speedometer mileage.

Finally he tapped Tilly's broad shoulder. "Douse the headlights. Go ahead about a mile and turn off. I'll walk from there."

When he stepped from the car, the darkness was like a thick, blinding blanket, the trees ghostly, the rutted road barely discernible. Tilly started to climb out, but Jim halted him.

"Stay put, Curlylocks, there might be fireworks."

He went as cautiously as he could up the road, stumbling occasionally when his foot slipped into a deep rut. Soon he saw the low bulk of the shack and a faint glimmer of light. Jim pulled his gun from the holster and slipped off the safety. He went on—slowly.

There was no sound, and in a short time he was pressed against the wall below the window with its drawn blind. He could distinctly hear voices, through the thin-board walls. One was heavy and burred.

"So we pull out tonight? What about the dough?"

The second voice, thin and whining, answered: "We get it as soon as the boss brings the guy in. We clean up nice, then scram."

Jim strained closer to the wall. He didn't have a warning. The pressure of the gun barrel was painful in his spine, and a soft voice carried a load of mockery.

"Yes, Mr. Lillard, they're talking about you—and me. Let's go in, shall we? No, don't turn! And drop your gun."

He slowly straightened and dropped the automatic. On order of the soft voice, he marched around the house and in the door. The room was soft

with lamplight and there were three men. One was big, burly, and a blue-black stubble covered his massive, dull face. The other was thin, stoop-shouldered, with a long nose and squinting eyes. The third was tied securely to a chair. It was Paul Walker!

The soft, mocking voice chuckled. "You may turn around, Mr. Lillard."

Jim turned and faced Bradley Shenckl. The gaunt face was wreathed in a malevolent smile. Jim's eyes widened, then narrowed with sudden comprehension. His own smile broke out.

"A nice setup, Mr. Shenckl! Let's see, you're administrator of Ruth Miller's estate, and that fits neatly into the picture. I'll lay five to one you've embezzled through the years, and it won't be long before she comes of age. You needed one hundred thousand to make up losses and the kidnap act was the answer. You paid yourself, straightening up the account. Right?"

Shenckl nodded, smiling, but his eyes were cold. Jim looked at Paul Walker. "Our mutual friend over there was well on the way to marrying Ruth and you didn't want to turn over her money just yet. So Paul Walker was slated to take the rap. Then you figured on another hundred thousand as clear gravy for yourself and placed a claim with the insurance company. It was all very neat, no clues, no way to trace, just one little item."

Shenckl chuckled. "I know. The airplane. You are really very clever, Mr. Lillard. Too bad you won't be with us long. I had the boys pick up Walker to make everything look nice."

"The program?" Jim inquired and calmly lit a cigarette.

SHENCKL chuckled again. "You'll appreciate it. I have both you and Walker prisoners, and I have taken both your guns. My boys will shoot you with Mr. Walker's gun, and Walker with yours. We walk off. When you're found, I'll be in a position to say you discovered Walker was the real kidnaper and you killed one an-

other in attempting to make the arrest."

Jim felt a grudging admiration for the man. Shenckl was talking again. "I made one serious slip, Mr. Lillard. When I learned the company was sending an investigator I became a little panicky. I had the boys arrange the bullet reception. That wasn't good strategy, but this will make up for it." His voice steeled. "All right, Cokie. Take them out and do the job!"

The big fellow yanked Walker to his feet while Cokie prodded Jim out the door, taking the gun from Shenckl as he passed. Under Cokie's urgings Jim walked toward the road. Walker was made to stop at the door.

"This is as far as we go, brother," Cokie growled, and the detective turned to face the shack.

He could see Walker, arms still bound, standing in the light of the doorway. Shenckl came out and stood to one side. Jim distinctly heard the click as Cokie, behind him, pulled back the hammer. Jim felt his muscles tighten and the hair crawl on the back of his neck.

There was a sudden commotion and loud curse from the roadway, a wild threshing of bushes. Jim heard Cokie's gasp. In that split second Jim whirled. The gunsling had half turned, eyes probing in the darkness toward the road. Jim swung a powerhouse blow. Cokie sensed the move and his gun started to line. Jim's fist connected square on the weak chin and Cokie sailed backward, the gun dropping from his hand.

Jim dived for it and a high whine over his head marked the passage of a bullet from the big torpedo in the doorway. Jim's fingers caught the gun, he half turned, the weapon flashing up. Walker, tightly bound, had thrown himself at his captor, muffling the man's movements, not letting him get set. Jim saw Shenckl fade away.

He changed his target and his gun barked spitefully at the gaunt shadow. Shenckl screamed, threw up his hands and fell. Jim came to his feet,

and started running toward the shack. Walker was flung sideways as the torpedo wrenched loose. Jim's smile was cold. He halted in mid-stride and sent two shots slugging precisely into the stubblebeard face. The battle stopped abruptly.

Tilly's voice sounded plaintively from the roadway. "That you, boss-man? I woke up back there an' got lonesome. But I ain't cravin' none of this promisc'ous salivatin'."

Jim called him in. He manacled Shenckl, as the gaunt man sat nursing a broken leg, cursing monotonously and horribly. Jim untied Walker and used the ropes to make Cokie safe and tight. The big man was dead.

The three of them stood looking at their prisoners, Tilly still big-eyed with surprise and fright. Paul Walker rubbed his numbed arms, staring down at Shenckl. Jim lit a cigarette.

"Better go to Paradine with us, Paul. You should break the news to Ruth." Walker nodded grimly. Jim laughed. "And let me give you a bit of advice. Don't let a knockout charmer like Ruth Miller run around free. Corral the girl, Paul, before someone else gets the idea."

Walker grinned. He took Shenckl's shoulders and signaled Tilly to help him. "Let's get the baggage to the police station, Jim. That last idea of yours was a honey!"



"I Talked with God"

(Yes, I Did—Actually and Literally)

and as a result of that little talk with God a strange Power came into my life. After 42 years of horrible, dismal, sickening failure, everything took on a brighter hue. It's fascinating to talk with God, and it can be done very easily once you learn the secret. And when you do—well—there will come into your life the same dynamic Power which came into mine. The shackles of defeat which bound me for years went a-shimmering—and now—?—well, I own control of the largest daily newspaper in our County, I own the largest office building in our City, I drive a beautiful Cadillac limousine. I own my own home which has a lovely pipe-organ in it, and my family are abundantly provided for after I'm gone. And all this has been made possible because one day, ten years ago, I actually and literally talked with God.

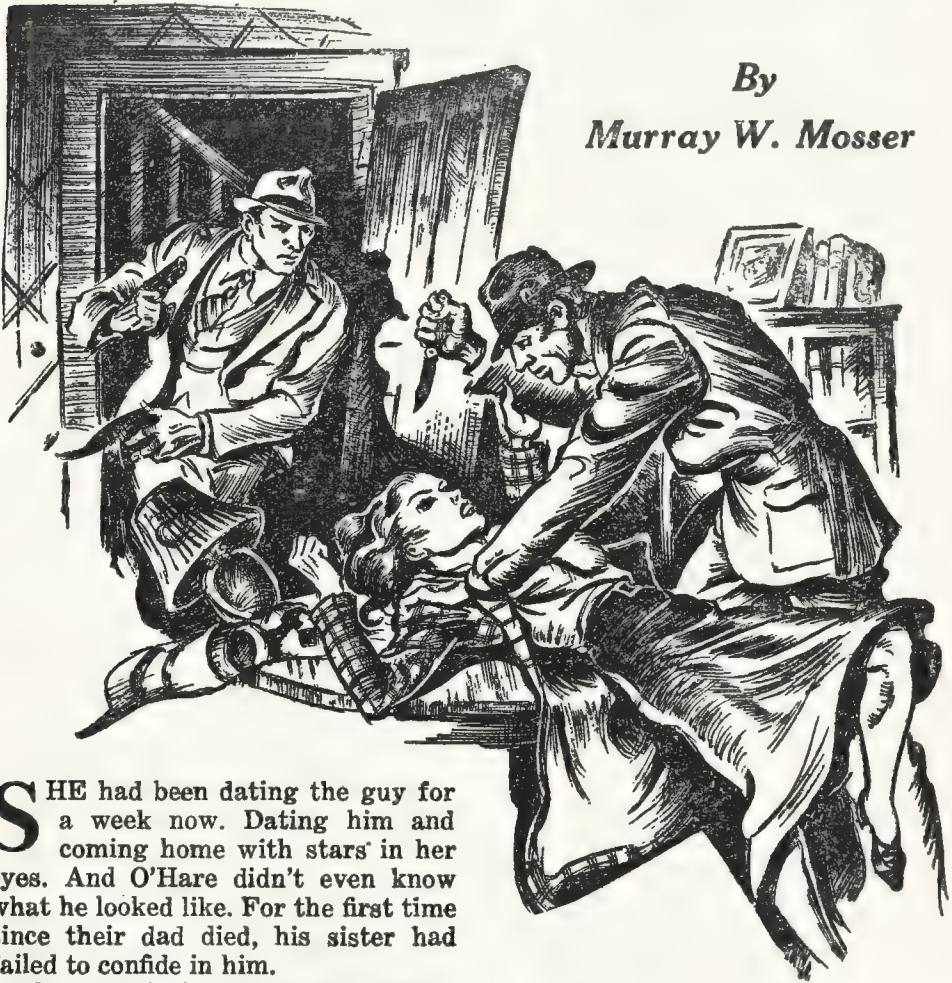
You, too, may experience that strange mystical Power which comes from talking with God, and when you do, if there is poverty, unrest,

unhappiness, or ill-health in your life, well—this same God-Power is able to do for you what it did for me. No matter how useless or helpless your life seems to be—all this can be changed. For this is not a human Power I'm talking about—it's a God-Power. And there can be no limitations to the God-Power, can there? Of course not. You probably would like to know how you, too, may talk with God, so that this same Power which brought me these good things might come into your life, too. Well—just write a letter or a post-card to Dr. Frank B. Robinson, Dept. 440, Moscow, Idaho, and full particulars of this strange Teaching will be sent to you free of charge. But write now—while you are in the mood. It only costs one cent to find out, and this might easily be the most profitable one cent you have ever spent. It may sound unbelievable—but it's true, or I wouldn't tell you it was. —Advt. Copyright, 1939, Frank B. Robinson.

Knife-Man's Nemesis

O'Hare had embarked on his strangest case. For he was on the trail of a man who combined business with pleasure by insuring his victims before killing them. And when O'Hare caught up with this homicide host, he found his quarry about to sacrifice another beautiful girl on the altar of greed.

By
Murray W. Mosser



SHE had been dating the guy for a week now. Dating him and coming home with stars in her eyes. And O'Hare didn't even know what he looked like. For the first time since their dad died, his sister had failed to confide in him.

That wasn't like her. They'd always been close. It had been Irene and he as long as he could remember. And she was just the sort of wild, lovable little scatterbrain who might ruin her life by marrying some dope to reform him, or some screwy thing like that.

O'Hare sighed as he entered the hospital room. He made a sincere effort to shelve his personal troubles in favor of his professional ones.

From what O'Hare had been able to gather, this John Saunders had

been found literally hacked to pieces. He had been found behind some trash barrels in an alley, where he had evidently been left for dead.

He was lying there on the high bed, a little wisp of a man. The fierce blue of his eyes stood out against the whiteness of the enormous swath of bandages.

Everybody knows that by the time you've worked up to a lieutenant of detectives you've become more or less hardened to misery and violence and death, and there shouldn't be anything about a case like this to get you. But something about the little man *did* get O'Hare.

"You've got to track him down!" Saunders said fiercely. "If you don't, he'll murder more girls like my poor Mary. That fiend has piled up a trail of blood—"

The little guy was practically a corpse. O'Hare could see this plainly. But something told him that no matter how hard the Black Angel flapped her wings, the little fellow wasn't going to give in to her until he had told his story.

"Two years ago my daughter eloped with this bird," Saunders was saying. "He was good-looking enough with his black hair and brown eyes. And even though he was lame he had a sort of magnetic attraction for her. Mary and this fellow Black rented a house and took out life insurance and settled down.

"Two young married women had been found murdered in recent months, cut to pieces. The third victim was my daughter." The little man said it calmly, but his eyes were terrible.

So that was it. A homicidal maniac. O'Hare's jaw tightened grimly. Having a kid sister to look after always brought things like this a little closer to home.

"Black collected his insurance and left town. Ma died, killed by the shock of what happened to Mary, and I promised myself I'd track down

Mary's murderer. A year later, in an out-of-town paper, I read of a killing enough like Mary's murder to send me scooting to that town. The description of the victim's husband tallied exactly with that of Black, even to the game leg. That was my first inkling Black might be the murderer, that he was a homicidal maniac who combined business with pleasure by insuring his victims.

"A week ago I trailed him here, after months of running down false clues. Even then it took me a week to locate him in the Forest Park section of the city."

Still closer to home. O'Hare and Irene lived in the Forest Park section. O'Hare wished Irene could hear the little man's story. Maybe she'd be more careful about taking up with strangers.

"Should have called the police, I reckon," Saunders was saying. "But the sight of him did something to me and I jumped him. He pulled a knife."

Saunders sank back, exhausted, and O'Hare could tell his life was hanging by a thread. Somewhere, the little man found strength to grip O'Hare's arm.

"You've got to track him down! Promise?"

"I'll do my best," O'Hare said softly.

He felt Saunders' grip relax. The little man's dead eyes were smiling up at him, as though his promise was all that mattered in life or death.

Finding a telephone booth on the main floor, O'Hare reported to his skipper.

Outside, he climbed into the squad car and listened to a general alarm going out via radio as he kicked the motor into life. He had to check in at headquarters and then, later, he had a date with Molly Donovan. The date was indefinite, because a cop's time is never his own, but Molly didn't seem to mind. Molly was Irene's closest friend and O'Hare thought the sun rose and set in her.

MOUNTING the steps of the walk-up apartment, O'Hare wondered what Irene had for supper. Whatever it was, he hoped there was a lot of it, because he was wolf-hungry.

And then, as his eyes came above the floor level, he froze. There was no crack of light shining from beneath his apartment door, and this made things definitely wrong. Irene was always home at this time, always had supper waiting for him. She hadn't missed a night since their father died.

O'Hare ran the last few steps, jammed the key home in the lock. He swung the door wide and snapped the switch, flooding the living room with light.

"Irene!" The cold emptiness of the apartment flung the shout back in his ears. And then he understood.

The golden-haired Irene was only teasing. She was always playing tricks on him. She'd come out of hiding in a minute, her sparkling blue eyes laughing at his fears.

He went from room to room, pretending to look for her. And suddenly he remembered she hadn't teased him at all for a week. Her mind had been too preoccupied with her new boy friend.

A week. What else had happened a week ago? It was there in the back of his mind—Saunders saying the mad butcher had come to town just a week before. But there was nothing to bring it forward, yet.

He snapped on the kitchen light and the first thing to catch his eye was the table, set for *one*. Then he saw the note on the plate and snatched it up.

Dear Tom:

I'm sorry, darling, but you'll have to get your own supper. Oh, I'm *so* happy, Tom! I'm eloping with the grandest man in the world! He's very good-looking and a swell person, even though he *is* handicapped. I know you'll be crazy about him! The next time you see me I'll be Mrs. Redford.

O'Hare groaned and crushed the note in a big fist. The little fool! The crazy, idiotic little fool! She'd only

known the guy a week and here she was eloping with him!

And what did she mean, handicapped? Was the guy blind, or maybe deaf, or a cripple?

A cripple!

The picture little Saunders had drawn for him was instantly there in his mind. The picture of a maniac who eloped with pretty girls, insured them, then butchered them. A maniac with a *game leg!*

O'Hare sucked in a sharp breath, so full of fear it hurt his chest. The telephone bell jangled and sudden relief flooded him. That would be Irene now, calling to tell him everything was okay.

But it wasn't Irene.

"This is George Fleming, with Gibraltar Life Insurance Company," a smooth voice said over the wire. "We wrote policies on your sister and her husband today and thought perhaps you would like to take advantage of our bargain offer. For a limited time only, we are offering additional policies in the same family at a reduced—"

O'Hare let the receiver slide back on the cradle and sat there, staring. He didn't really believe it, even then. His police duties had shown him, first hand, the work of homicidal maniacs. But he just couldn't believe such a thing could strike this close to home.

And then all at once he did believe it, and a terrible pressure built up within him that threatened to blow his mind to pieces.

Dropping his head into his hands, he began to massage his scalp mechanically. The act brought back a flash of sanity and he grasped at it, trying to reason with himself. After all, what did he actually have to go on? Merely that the killer eloped with his victims, insured them, that he had come to town at the same time Irene had met her new boy friend, that he had been seen in their neighborhood, that Irene's boy friend was handicapped. Lord, that "handicapped" could mean anything, didn't

necessarily mean the man was lame!

But then his line of reasoning back-fired on him. Separately, perhaps, these items meant nothing, but put them together and you had a chain too strong for coincidence. And when you added the fact that it was decidedly unnatural for a man to take out insurance on his wife before the ink was dry on the marriage certificate—

O'HARE'S mind conjured up a vision, stark and real and ghastly, of Irene's horribly mutilated body. He tried to blot it out by closing his eyes, but that only made it more vivid.

And then another crushing thought. The murderer was certain he'd killed Saunders. But when he read the newspapers and found the little man had lived long enough to identify him, Irene's life wouldn't be worth a plugged nickel! He wouldn't wait to collect insurance on her, couldn't afford to, since her description would be an added hazard to him. *The police themselves had doomed her when they sent out a general alarm for him!*

O'Hare groaned. He couldn't put her description on the airlines because that would only stack the cards against her more than they were stacked now. So he gathered up photographs and snapshots of her and rushed down to headquarters, refusing to admit, even to himself, that she might already be dead.

Two hours and two packages of cigarettes later he was back, gaunt-eyed, the worry lines deeply etched in his dark face. The skipper had assigned a squad of men to him, trusted men who wouldn't talk. They'd checked and double-checked. The eloping couple weren't stopping at any of the hotels and they hadn't taken a train or a bus. That meant they were traveling by automobile.

O'Hare began to pace the floor, fumbling for another cigarette, heedless of the fact that chain-smoking two packs of them had left his throat raw. He *had* to do something! He

couldn't just wait for a phone call from Irene that would probably never come!

His mind was rusty with fear, but he forced it to churn out ideas which he discarded as fast as he thought them up.

And then—inspiration!

Molly! Molly was Irene's best friend and if anyone knew where Irene had gone it would be Molly! The feeling became a certainty as he reached for the phone. He cursed his police-trained mind which had made him think of routine tracing first.

Molly's voice came over the wire in a low contralto.

"Molly! Do you know where Irene is?"

"I've been waiting for you to call, darling." Molly's voice held a teasing note. "Of course I know where she is!"

"Thank the Lord!" There was relief in his voice that that hurdle was past. Fear in it, too. Fear of what might happen before he could do anything about it. "Tell me! Hurry!"

"Oh, no! Irene's new husband is a shy sort of fellow and he didn't want her to tell *anyone* where they were going. He was very emphatic about it. But she's only a girl after all so she couldn't keep from telling me. But she made me promise—"

"Molly! This is life and death!"

"Uh-huh. I've heard that one before, too. Now listen, Tom O'Hare! You needn't think you can trick me into—"

"Trick you?" O'Hare groaned. "You're tricking her into her grave! She's eloped with a madman, a killer! Can't you understand that? A homicidal maniac! Surely you've heard the radio, seen the papers—"

"Certainly I've seen them! So that doesn't work, either. The papers say your killer has black hair. Irene's husband is a blond!"

O'Hare, muttering something about hair bleaches in a strangled voice, got the sudden full import of something she said. *Irene's new husband was emphatic about not wanting her to tell anyone where they were going!*

Everything O'Hare had felt up to that time was as nothing compared to the frantic fear that gripped him now. With one last desperate prayer, he yelled: "Molly! Did he limp?"

"Why, yes, he did. When he saw I was noticing it, he said something about a blister on his heel. That could happen to anyone. Look, Tom, haven't you carried this joke far enough?"

"Joke?" O'Hare choked on it. "She's eloping with a killer, I tell you! He hacks his victims to pieces with a knife!"

The wire was sulky with silence for a moment and O'Hare's words hung in the air, echoing over and over again in his ears.

"Damn you, Molly!" he shouted suddenly. "You're killing her, just as surely as though you were sticking the knife into her heart yourself!" Ordinarily he wouldn't have said it, but he was crazy with fear.

Molly Donovan was the sort to understand things like that. She must have decided he was dead serious, because she said: "I'll meet you at the airport in fifteen minutes. We'll have to charter a plane for Spanish Springs."

HAVING spent his own vacation at Spanish Springs the previous summer, O'Hare had a vivid recollection of the cabins scattered along the lake shore. The tiny airport was in a town at the head of the lake, five miles from the main Spanish Springs lodge.

The car O'Hare had wired for was waiting, and a ten-dollar bill bought five miles of speed.

Molly sat beside O'Hare in the car, very close, holding one of his big hands in her two small ones. It was evident she had absorbed a great deal of his tension.

Molly had light brown hair and dark brown eyes and a mouth which might have been a trifle large to be beautiful, but which was just right for kissing. She probably wouldn't have been a success in the movies, but there was something about her in real life, in the

way she laughed and the way she walked and the way she talked that always won admiring glances from the men.

As they left the car and started up the long pathway, O'Hare's legs ached with the desire to run. But he held himself in check, knowing a sudden commotion now might be disastrous.

It was a little log cabin nestling there in the woods three or four hundred yards from its neighbors. O'Hare's knock was carefully executed, so gentle he could scarcely hear it himself above the hammering of the blood in his head. And then the door was open and a blond man was standing there. No sign of Irene. No indication there was anyone else in the cabin at all.

"Well, where is she?" O'Hare yelled. "By hell if you've—"

Molly tugged at his arm. "Tom—" she began.

"Shut up! I'll handle this!"

"But Tom—"

"Now look!" the blond man said defensively. He'd turned several shades whiter. "I can explain everything! I can—"

Over the blond man's shoulder, O'Hare saw a woman come into view. She was very definitely not Irene. This one was dark and walked with a hippy motion that could have been acquired in a burlesque chorus. The faded blue dressing gown she wore did a poor job of covering a full figure.

"I've been trying to tell you!" Molly wailed. "This isn't the man!"

"Say, what is this?" the hippy brunette demanded in a throaty voice. "Who is this, Hugo?"

Hugo was frankly flabbergasted. "Hey!" he yelled. "You mean this guy ain't your husband?" He turned savagely on O'Hare. "Why, I oughta—!"

"Skip it! Skip it!" O'Hare said wearily. "Isn't this cabin twelve?"

"Naw!" the brunette said. She looked O'Hare over carefully while O'Hare mentally cursed the driver for bringing them to the wrong cabin. "This is eleven. Twelve is next up the

line. Only you won't find nobody there."

"Why?"

"Cause it burned down tonight, that's why!" she said triumphantly.

"Burned—down!" It hit O'Hare with a sickening jolt. He died a little inside himself then, as he would never die again. "Did they— Were there any bodies?"

"Naw, I don't think so," the hippy brunette said. Then, hopefully, as though the idea appealed to her morbid mind: "Say, there might have been, though! Them ashes was too hot to kick around through. I wonder— Hey!" This last as O'Hare shouldered past her to the telephone on the wall.

The phone, he knew from his own visit, was connected with a switchboard in the main lodge.

"That couple in number twelve!" he yelled into the transmitter. "Where are they?"

"I'm not deaf!" the operator said indignantly. "Mr. and Mrs. Redford were moved into cabin number thirteen."

"Thirteen?" O'Hare groaned. "*Thirteen!*"

He didn't even bother to hang up the phone. Whipping out of the cabin, he yelled, "C'mon!" to Molly and streaked down the path.

O'HARE shuddered as he passed the glowing embers of cabin twelve, but he took heart from the fact Irene had been alive when they were moved to the new cabin. Then, realizing the fire had taken place hours before, he sped on, carrying an ever increasing load of terror.

Coming out of the woods suddenly, he stared at the forbidding darkness of cabin thirteen. Somewhere behind him he could hear Molly running. Off to the right, the waves of the lake made a low, booming sound. A bullfrog's plaintive croak came out of the distance. The cabin was utterly, frighteningly silent.

Moving swiftly across the clearing, O'Hare knocked at the door. He

whirled at a sound behind him, saw it was only Molly, panting for breath. From the cabin—nothing. O'Hare rapped again, frantically this time. He backed off a little, preparatory to ramming the door with his shoulder. Then he saw the couple come out of the woods on the opposite path.

For a moment he couldn't believe it was Irene standing there, the moonlight glinting softly through her golden hair.

"Tom!" Irene cried. "And Molly! How did you get here?" There was surprise in her voice, but no particular welcome. She ran across the clearing.

She had the key in her hand and she unlocked the door, switched on the light. She asked them in, but she was plainly resentful of their presence. Redford, who lagged behind, came in then.

"This is my husband, Frank Redford," Irene introduced. She said it with a lot of pride. Then: "Frank, this is my brother Tom, and his girl friend, Molly Donovan."

Redford stuck out a hand, but he, too, was frankly displeased. He mumbled a "*pleastameecha*" which probably meant just the opposite. O'Hare could see no trace of the magnetic personality Saunders had talked about.

And, as Molly had said, the guy's hair was blond. It was one of those colors man has never been able to duplicate with bleaches and bottled dyes, and there was no mistaking its genuineness.

O'Hare stood there a long moment, taking Redford apart with his eyes, weighing possibilities. Something tickled the back of his mind, then burst into thought with an emphatic force. *Redford walked without the slightest trace of a limp!*

Molly had been right. This wasn't the murderer. O'Hare let out a long sigh. He was too happy for the moment to be resentful of the fact he'd come all the way up here on a wild goose chase.

Redford moved across the room and

leaned against the mantel of the huge fireplace, looking uncomfortable. Irene retreated defensively to his side and he put his arm around her. Her blue eyes glared defiance at O'Hare.

"Well, why don't you say something?" she screamed suddenly. "Haven't I got a right to live my own life? Haven't I—"

"Sure, sure," O'Hare said soothingly. "We just wanted to make sure you were all right. Come on, Molly, we'll be going."

Turning toward the door, he caught the glint of light from the groom's polished nails as Redford combed his fingers through his blond hair. Then O'Hare saw something else and whirled.

"Let me see your knife, Redford," he said softly.

A blur of motion put Redford behind Irene, one arm clasp ing her in a tight embrace. O'Hare had never before seen a man move so incredibly fast. His own hand streaked to his hip, froze there as he saw the point of the long, gleaming knife at Irene's neck. The guy must have had it in his sleeve all the time, waiting for something like this.

Irene's eyes were wide and blank, as though her mind was unable to comprehend the monstrous thing that was happening to her. Her jaw dropped a little, but otherwise she was rigidly erect.

Molly screamed behind O'Hare and then he heard a dull thud, indicating she had fainted dead away.

Redford's face was twisted, terrible. The mania to murder was there in his eyes and O'Hare expected at any moment to see the killer start frothing at the mouth.

"Leave the gun alone, copper! Do I have to tell you what happens to her if you get any ideas?"

He certainly didn't have to tell O'Hare. The horrible picture was already there in O'Hare's mind, and the killer was crouched behind Irene. He stood in such a manner as to present the smallest possible target, even

if O'Hare could get the automatic out and snap off the safety and get a slug away before the knife was driven home in Irene's neck.

Sick with fear, O'Hare let his hand fall away from the gun.

Irene snapped out of it suddenly. "Frank!" she screamed. "Oh, Frank! What are you doing?"

"Shut up!" he snarled, drawing the point of the knife along her neck.

O'Hare saw the blood bead up out of the shallow cut, saw Irene stiffen again as terror drew the white skin tight over her face.

"GET over there!" Redford indicated the wall telephone with a slight inclination of his head. "Call the main lodge and have them send a car down here. I'm trading you her life for mine!"

"How do I know you'll keep your word?" O'Hare asked hoarsely.

The killer snickered. "That's the chance you'll have to take!"

O'Hare knew it wasn't any chance at all. He'd kill her sure, now, to pay them back for trapping him like this. She was as good as dead already. They were bargaining over a corpse.

But however infinitesimal her chance might be, she had to have it. O'Hare ordered the car. His mind began to work at a furious pace, weighing every possibility. The knife at Irene's throat said the odds were a million to one against her if he tried to jump Redford.

Then Redford was backing slowly toward the door, Irene's terrorized feet automatically matching his steps. The point of the knife was pressed even deeper into her neck.

O'Hare let his eyes flick to Molly, lying so white and still on the floor. He was thankful she had fainted. She, at least, was being spared the horror of this mad scene. She lay with one leg curled back under her, her purse gripped tightly in one hand.

Redford had spotted her position, was backing carefully around her toward the door.

O'Hare, watching closely, hurled himself suddenly forward. Several things happened at once. Molly's hand grabbed Redford's ankle and jerked. O'Hare got a handful of Irene's golden hair and pulled her head away from the menacing knife. The knife jabbed forward, but sunk into Irene's shoulder instead of her neck.

O'Hare removed the knife with a terrific jerk that sent her spinning across the room, closed with the killer. A white-hot pain stabbed through him as a sudden slash of the long knife raked a gash from his elbow to his wrist.

Then O'Hare felt the knuckles of his other hand explode against the killer's jaw with a numbing force. He had everything he owned in that blow—and it was plenty! Redford staggered back against the wall, his eyes suddenly glassy. The knife dropped from his nerveless fingers and he slid down the wall into a sitting position, then bent all the way over at the floor. O'Hare kicked the knife across the room, then kicked Redford in the jaw for insurance. . . .

O'Hare's wound turned out to be more serious than Irene's, but the doctor told him a few stitches and a little time would fix it up.

Later, talking it over with Molly, O'Hare said: "Didn't it occur to you Redford's hair might have been blond in the first place and that he had it

dyed when Saunders knew him, then let it grow out?"

She shook her head.

"Well, it didn't to me, either, until I saw him comb his fingers through it. When he did that he exposed some blond hairs underneath which had black tips.

"That game leg was something else again. The doc who examined him said he had broken it some time ago. The doc explained that with certain types of breaks people are lame for quite a while, but they usually grow out of it. Occasionally, even when there is no more necessity for them to limp, they'll find themselves doing it from force of habit. That's what happened to Redford when you saw him limp."

"But how did you know I hadn't fainted?" Molly asked. "I was scared to death, so I know there wasn't any color in my face. And I had to lie quiet. I didn't dare move a muscle, even to give you a signal, for fear he would hear me. And you must have known. You wouldn't have been able to move so fast if you hadn't."

O'Hare grinned at her. "Sure I knew. You were gripping your purse so tight your knuckles were white. When people faint, they relax. They can't hold anything!"

Putting both arms around his neck, Molly drew his head down. "Don't tell anyone," she whispered in his ear, "but I think I'll give up fainting. I want to hold my man!"



Crimson Currency

By Hal Quincy

|| Five grand seemed like lot of hay to a twenty-five dollar a week bank clerk. But all the shekels in the world couldn't || change a jail cot into a gilded berth.



THAT night, when somebody blew up the vault in the Farmer's Trust, fifty miles away, he scared the wits out of everybody in Midvale. They figured the Midvale

Bank would be next. They said Marty McCloud was on a rampage and would be here within a week. I didn't think so. The Farmer's Trust job didn't sound like Marty McCloud. He'd never "souped" a bank before. That wasn't his style.

I guess you've heard of Marty. Everybody has. For three years he'd been knocking off small town banks right through the Midwest. A couple of tellers were holding up tombstones because of Marty. They say he's a vicious killer, but I don't think so. I think they got him all wrong.

Marty is a daytime worker. He fixes himself with a disguise, maybe a fake mustache and some powder on his hair, and he'll wear a quiet black suit. Then he'll march into the bank like a deacon, open an account and case the joint carefully, the cages, the exits, the streets running out of town.

The next day he'd drive up to the bank in a stolen heap, walk inside with one of his boys, leaving the other idling the motor at the curb. Then he'd stick a gun into the teller's face, hand him a sack and tell him to fill it.

Simple? You bet. It took nerve but

that's one thing Marty McCloud had. He was cool as steel. Only sometimes somebody would get the notion of setting off the alarm and Marty's boy would have to start pouring lead.

That was the way Marty McCloud worked and I couldn't see him changing to nitroglycerin.

At any rate, Mr. Crimmons, the president of the Midvale Bank, was so worried he had the rest of us on edge. That meant Chris Jaeger and myself. Chris Jaeger is a combination cashier and teller. I'm the bookkeeper.

The Midvale Bank isn't much, only a tiny stone building, but then the population of the town is less than five hundred. Cattle country it is, and most of the five hundred worked in the packing plant at the edge of town. So, of course, on payday there's always a sizable amount of cash lying around.

Well, one night I was alone in my room at Mrs. Callahan's boarding house when there was a knock on the door. I put down my book and opened the door, and there was Chris Jaeger. His white teeth flashed in a broad smile and he sauntered into the room and sank into a chair.

To say that I was surprised to see Chris would be an understatement. You see, Chris Jaeger didn't belong in a small town like Midvale. He had too much on the ball. Picture the face of a movie star, a glib tongue, and a manner smooth and slick as butter. That's Chris. He should have been a con man or a high pressure bond salesman on Wall Street.

AS I SAY, I was surprised to see Chris Jaeger in my room. We hadn't been talking for a couple of weeks, ever since he made a play for Ethel. Ethel is Mr. Crimmons' daughter, and she helped out at the bank whenever the books had to be brought up to date for the examiner.

How can I tell you about Ethel? She's small, almost boyish, a strawberry blonde with a heart-shaped face and eyes so blue it hurt me to look at them. Outside of that, Ethel is just an average girl, no smarter or dumber than the rest. But I love her. I guess I've loved her ever since the first time she smiled at me and my knees went weak.

There are prettier girls in town than Ethel, and Chris Jaeger could have any one of them. And yet he picked on Ethel simply because he knew the way I felt about her. He turned on his considerable charm as you'd turn on a fire hose. It just poured out of him. It would have turned the head of a stronger girl than Ethel. She was no exception and in a short time she cut down my dates to one a week.

I put my fists on my hips and said: "What do you want, Chris?"

"Now, Ed," he told me in a patronizing voice, "that's no way to greet a friend."

"Some friend! First you swipe my girl, and then you sit and smirk at me all day."

He let a hurt expression cross his face. He could put on a swell act, Chris could.

"Why," he said, sounding amazed, "I didn't think you really cared for Ethel. I'm sorry, Ed. If you want me to I'll step out of the picture."

"Yeah, and break her heart."

Chris didn't say anything. He just frowned and took out a deck of pills and lighted one. The smoke curled up around his face and he squinted through it at me. I guess I know Chris as well as anybody in town and I could see there was something on his mind.

I didn't tell him that. I just waited for him to talk.

After a while he said: "You know, Ed, I'm thinking of leaving town. There isn't much chance for a fellow here in Midvale. I'd like to go to Chicago, or maybe New York."

Something twisted inside of me with a sharp pang. "You gonna take Ethel?"

He blew two rings of smoke and waited till they flattened out against the ceiling. "I don't think so," he said slowly, and then let his gaze drift to mine. "In a way that depends on you, Ed."

"What do you mean?"

He leaned forward and his expression changed, grew earnest. "Look, Ed, how much do you make?"

"At the bank?" I asked, lifting my eyebrows. "You know that."

"Yes," he pointed out. "Twenty-five dollars a week, the same as myself."

"What about it?"

"It isn't much, is it, Ed? You can't get rich on it. That's all you'll be making in another ten years. Mr. Crimmons doesn't believe in raises. And there aren't any pensions at the bank. When you get to be fifty or sixty years old, you'll find yourself without a job and no income."

"There's social security," I said. "The government will take care of me."

Chris snorted. "You know what you'll get? A paltry couple of dollars a month, scarcely enough to keep a roof over your head."

He was trying to get at something, so I let him. "You're right about that, Chris, but what can a guy do? The cards are stacked against him."

CHRIS stubbed out his cigarette and heaved to his feet, moving around the room and swiveling his eyes so as to keep them on me.

"That's just it, Ed. You've got to do a little shuffling in this life. You've got to stack the cards yourself. You've got to give yourself a break."

"You're trying to say something,

Chris. All right, get down to it. I'm listening."

"You know what happened at the Farmer's Trust last week?" he asked.

"Sure, somebody blew the vault open, but they didn't get anything."

"Exactly. The money had been shipped that afternoon to the Federal Reserve Bank. You know what that means?"

"No," I admitted. "What does it mean?"

"That Marty McCloud will be casting around for a new bank to crack. Everybody knows that Thursday is payday at the packing plant. We have more than ten thousand dollars on hand then. Is there anything more natural than that McCloud will be along?"

I gulped and let out a whistle. "Say, you're right! Maybe we ought to get Mr. Crimmons to buy us a couple of guns."

He shook his head slowly. "No, Ed, that isn't what I'm trying to get at." He watched me obliquely, his eyes speculative, a little cagey. I knew then exactly what he was trying to get at and the funny thing is it didn't surprise me. Working in close proximity with a guy for a couple of years you get to sense how he thinks; sort of.

I walked to the door, opened it, glanced up and down the hall, closed it, then came back to him.

"I think I see it, Chris. Your idea is to beat McCloud to the punch."

A sigh of relief gusted out of him. He wet his lips with the edge of his tongue and nodded. "Something like that."

"Keep on talking. I'm still listening."

He sat down again, cupped a flame to another cigarette, flipped the match to the floor. "Well," he said, "if I can get a decent stake I'll leave Midvale and you can have Ethel. What's more I'll split the proceeds with you."

I was curious. "What gave you the idea, Chris?"

"Why," he announced complacently, "it's a natural. A chance like this

comes only once in a lifetime. Everybody is talking about Marty McCloud and when the money is stolen they'll think he did it."

"Isn't it dangerous?" I wanted to know. "The packing plant just hired two guards to accompany the paymaster."

He waved airily. "The money will be stolen before it ever reaches the paymaster."

"How?"

He settled back in his chair. "Listen, Thursday is payday. That means the money is in the bank Wednesday night. And on Wednesday night my plan takes effect. The safe is blown up. Only there won't be any money in it."

This was all very confusing. I shook my head. "I don't get it, Chris. Why blow up the safe if there isn't any money in it?"

"Because it will already be in our possession," he stated placidly. "Let me explain. Instead of locking the money Wednesday afternoon in the safe, I'll take it away with me. I'll drop it into the lining of my coat. I've got it cut up into sections so the money won't all bulk up in one place. It will—"

"Wait a minute," I cut in. "How are we gonna make it look like Marty McCloud's work?"

"That's what I'm coming to. It'll be easy. You have the keys. We're the last ones out of the bank. We merely fix a time bomb clocked to explode about two a.m. We hide it beside the safe and it'll blow the door off. When the sheriff gets there the money will be missing. Everybody will say Marty McCloud took it." He looked up at me. "How's that, Ed?"

I COULDN'T help staring in open admiration. It was clever, all right. Almost too clever. The question was, where were we to get a time bomb? I put it to Chris.

He smiled. "You remember I took a short trip some weeks ago," he said. "Well, I got it then, from a friend of mine. We're all set, Ed. I'd do it my-

self, only I need your help. You're supposed to check figures with me before the money is locked up. It's five thousand bucks apiece, Ed. That's a lot of hay."

"And how about the depositors?" I inquired.

He shrugged. "You know everything is insured. It won't cost them a cent. Well, what do you say?"

I stared at Chris for a long time. He stared right back at me without flinching, his face as expressionless as a ripe tomato. That's the kind of guy he was. "Okay," I said, "that's good enough for me."

He tendered his hand and I grasped it. His palm was moist and felt like a piece of cold dough taken from an ice box. We talked about it some more and then it got to be pretty late, so Chris went home and left me alone.

The following Wednesday everything went along smoothly according to schedule. Mr. Crimmons went home shortly before closing. Seated behind my rolltop desk I could see Chris stashing packages of currency in different places around his person. He'd brought a small parcel with him that morning, wrapped in heavy manila paper and he carried it down to the safe with him. When he came up we didn't say anything. I let him out, locked the door behind us and we walked casually in opposite directions.

I didn't get to my room that night till pretty late. Midnight almost. I went straight to bed, but I didn't fall asleep. I couldn't. The room was dark and my eyes were glued to the radium dial of the clock on my bureau. The hands kept moving slowly, relentlessly, and as the deadline approached my teeth were chattering.

And then it came. A muffled explosion, full, deep-throated. I just lay there, the skin gathering in little pleats at the back of my neck, and the heart thumping hard against my ribs. My fingernails dug so tightly into the sheets they must have made little holes.

What happened then was something not calculated in my plans. Maybe an hour had passed when the door banged open and electric glare coned down. I blinked my eyes to find Sheriff Sam Newbold towering above my bed, his beard-stubbed wedge-shaped face hard and grim.

"Come on, Ed, get up," he said harshly.

I struggled to a sitting position. "What—what's the matter, sheriff?"

Then I saw the big gun dangling in his leathery fist and I knew what the matter was. Something had gone wrong, plenty wrong. I got up and started to pull my pants on. The sheriff went rummaging through my bureau and suddenly I heard him let out a sharp whistle. I turned and there he was riffling through a sheaf of crisp currency that he pulled out from under some of my clothes. He turned his eyes on me and they glinted like bits of wire.

"Where's the rest of it, Ed?" he demanded.

I felt moisture on my upper lip and the sweat was trickling down my back, but I didn't say anything. I kept my mouth shut. We walked the four blocks to the bank. Mr. Crimmons was there and so were two of the sheriff's deputies. And right away I saw where Chris Jaeger had crossed me.

MR. CRIMMONS, nervous as a rabbit, kept shaking his gray face. "I'm surprised, Ed. I never would've believed it. Look, they found your fountain pen beside the safe here where you dropped it. And your handkerchief was in the alley, with your initials on it. I had faith in you, Ed. Why, only a couple of days ago I told Chris that I was goin' to promote you, make you sort of manager because I was going South for my health . . ."

He kept blabbering away, but I didn't hear the rest. I was thinking of Chris and how he'd tried to frame me, leaving my pen on the floor, planting some of the loot in my room. He'd never wanted to leave Midvale. He

just wanted to discredit me. Jealousy, that's what it was. He wanted the job for himself. He couldn't stand seeing anybody get ahead of him. That's the kind of skunk he was. He didn't care if they sent me to prison for a hundred years so long as he had his own way.

I started to say something, but I never got the words out, because at that moment the war broke out. First a single shot, then a burst from a machine gun, rapid, staccato, like some lethal tap dance. They cracked through Midvale's early morning stillness, shattering the remnants of everybody's nerves.

Newbold's jaw was hanging slack. Mr. Crimmons' face looked like scraped bone. The two deputies stood motionless, impaled by shock, gulping. My heart was pounding away like a trip hammer. And then Sheriff Newbold took off like a scalded cat. He was out of that bank, racing away in the direction of the shots before anybody else moved. I wanted to go myself, but Jim Pyne, one of the deputies, jabbed his gun against my ribs.

They tried to guess what had happened. I didn't have to guess. I knew. And when the sheriff returned everything I'd figured was confirmed. His big face was a little dazed and there was a hurt tone in his voice.

"Why didn't you tell me, Ed, instead of the G-men? I could have taken Marty McCloud as well as anybody."

"Wh-what!" gasped Mr. Crimmons. "McCloud! Where?"

"He's dead. Ed here tipped the G-men off so they could catch him at Chris Jaeger's place. Chris had picked the safe clean as a hound's tooth yesterday and had the money up in his room. Ed knew all about it. He used it to bait McCloud. Then he got in touch with the government boys.

They've got Chris. He's the only one that ain't dead."

Mr. Crimmons stared at me incredulously. I thought I ought to tell him what happened. "You see, Mr. Crimmons," I said, "Marty McCloud came in here a few days ago to open an account. He was disguised, but I recognized him. Gosh, I ought to, we lived together for ten years. He's my stepbrother. I was afraid if he held up the bank maybe you or somebody would get hurt.

"So I followed him outside and told him about Chris's plan to rob the bank. I told him it would be safer to go after Chris. I wanted him to get caught. I don't like all this killing his boys have been doing. So I got in touch with the FBI and told them everything."

Deep red flushed through Mr. Crimmons' face. He was sore as a gumboil. "You knew all about it," he yelled, and I thought he was going to have apoplexy. "And you let my safe get blown up. You're fired, Ed. I don't ever want to see you again."

I gaped at him. It's funny, but in all that excitement and anxiety to capture Marty McCloud we'd clean forgot about the time bomb. Anyway the important thing was the bankroll and every cent of that was recovered.

Things moved along pretty fast after that. Chris got what was coming to him. He may be better looking than me, he may be slicker with the girls, but I'm just as smart any day. And I guess Mr. Crimmons will have to give me back my job. After all I got to support Ethel.

Say, you ought to see her now. We just checked into this hotel on our honeymoon and she's blushing like a mackintosh. Yes, sir, I wish Chris could see me now.

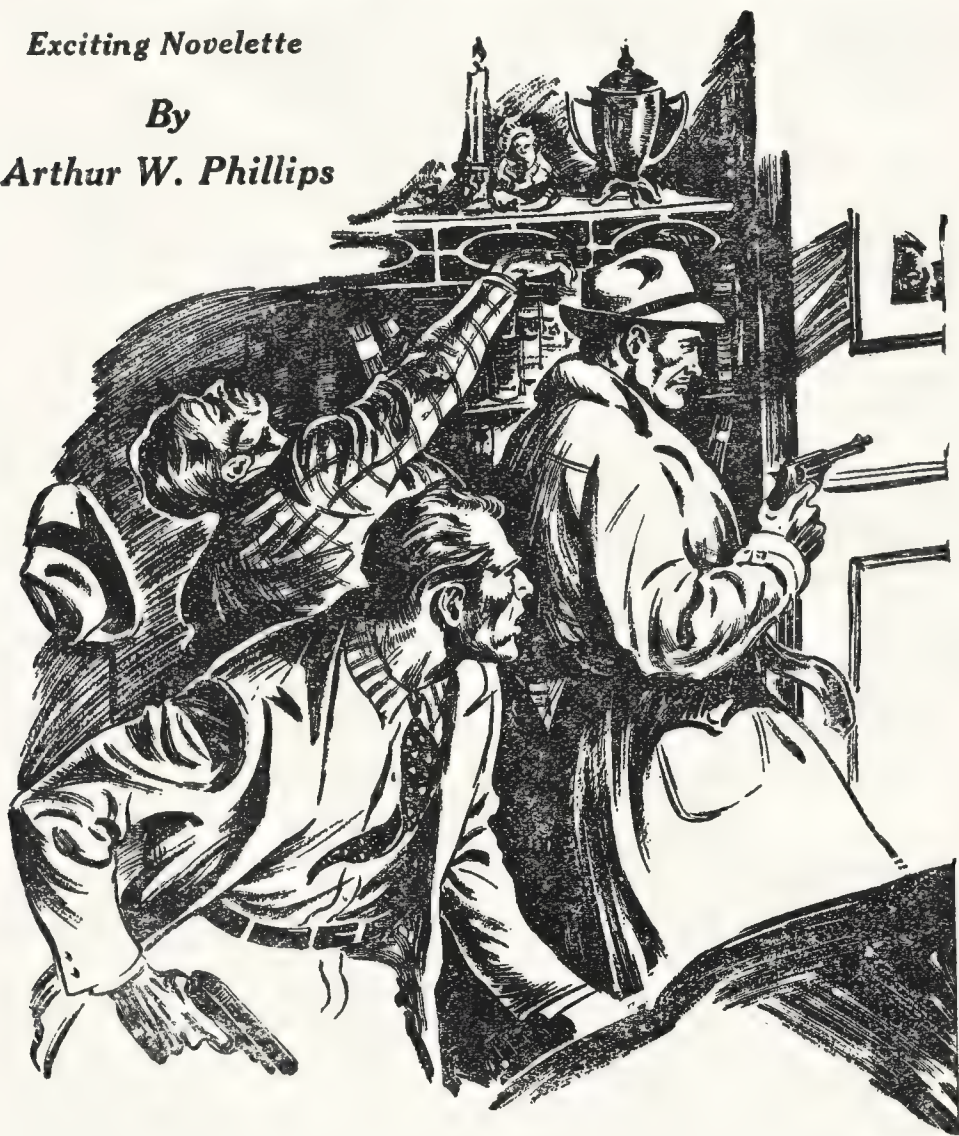


Hot Seat Double-Crosser

Exciting Novelette

By

Arthur W. Phillips



They called Devon the Bloodhound Reporter because his meat was crime news. But when Devon tried to stick his nose into a murder mixup assigned to the law-dogs, the scent led to his own homicide headlines.

CHAPTER I

SEATED at a table in Groccio's crowded restaurant, Matt Devon sipped his coffee leisurely, a cynical gleam in his gray eyes. He glanced up when the orchestra snapped short a popular dance tune. A plump, pink-cheeked man in eve-

TSD

ning dress and wearing a wide smile stepped to the front of the dais and held up a pudgy hand for silence.

"The management," he announced over muted conversation, "has curtailed the usual dance program to enable its patrons to listen in on Martin Wyndell's speech."

A smattering of handclaps rewarded him. Seconds later, a clear voice spoke through the radio loudspeaker rigged up on the platform:

"And his record as State's District Attorney for the past four years is well known to you all. Tonight's is the first in a series of radio addresses opening his campaign. It is with great pleasure I introduce Martin Wyndell, candidate for governor."

Devon scowled. Uncannily successful in solving crimes that had baffled police and G-men alike, he was known to the *Argonaut's* avid readers as the Bloodhound Reporter. Politics, unless connected with crime, bored him.

And politics had halted him in Oldham City that afternoon halfway on his return trip home from a visit south. However, the telegram despatched by Devon's editor had nothing to do with crime.

In fact, after reading the message, Devon decided it had nothing to do with anything so far as he was concerned.

He suspected a touch of irony behind the curt request to break his journey and report tonight's opening speech by Martin Wyndell. He had complied with the request to the extent of staying overnight merely to renew acquaintance with Oldham City, next in importance to Brulon, the state's capital. For the rest, one of the local scribes had promised him a verbatim copy of the speech for transmission to his paper.

And now the management of Groccio's had ruined one of his hours of relaxation.

The scowl on Devon's harsh face deepened. He rose quietly, a tall, broad-shouldered man with flat hips,

his lean six feet of hardness topped by blond hair.

Nearby, the thin wail of a police siren came faintly to his ears. His eyes gleamed. He dropped a bill on the table just as a deep voice with a peculiar husk to it signified Martin Wyndell was on the air.

The long strides that carried Devon outside seemed unhurried, yet he moved swiftly. On Fourth Avenue, a large crowd milled across the road near an intersecting street a short distance away.

The Bloodhound Reporter dodged between stalled cars, mingled with the throng. His tall figure pushed forward until he was jostled among the front ranks being held back by a burly patrolman.

He glanced along a dimly lighted side street, spotted two cars drawn in to the curb. Several men were grouped around something on the ground. The walls of Devon's thin nostrils quivered.

"What's the trouble?" he asked the policeman.

"Murder!" the man grunted, his attention occupied in controlling the surging crowd. "Hey, come back!" he yelled when Devon thrust past him.

"Reporter," the blond giant flung over his shoulder. He headed along the side street before the harassed patrolman could prevent him.

The three men stood watching a fourth who knelt beside a still figure sprawled over the pavement. They turned and glanced curiously at Devon when he approached.

THE Bloodhound Reporter recognized one as a police sergeant he had met at headquarters that afternoon. Sergeant Honeyman was a big, deep-chested man. A long scar disfigured the left side of his square face, gave him a permanent ferocious scowl. He took a step forward.

"Beat it, Devon!" he rasped. "We keep reporters muzzled here until we're ready to dish out information. Get back among the crowd!"

Devon grinned bleakly. "Sergeant Honeyman presents visiting news reporter with keys of city," he murmured. "Sorry, sergeant, but Oldham City killings aren't important enough to rate even a couple of sticks in my paper. Sheer boredom and a morbid curiosity dragged me here."

"I've heard plenty about your curiosity," Honeyman growled. "We don't tolerate amateur newspaper sleuths sticking their noses in police affairs. See him back to the corner, Laird!"

Devon shrugged and turned away.

"The sergeant has a sweet disposition," he murmured to the grinning detective flanking him.

"Yeah," Laird admitted. "It's partly his lumbago. He's feeling sore tonight." He glanced keenly at the blond giant. "I've read about you, Devon, admired your work on some of the cases you've busted. Stick around, an' maybe you'll get a story."

Devon smiled. "Thanks, but I meant it when I said curiosity dragged me along. We get all the stick-up killings we can use in my own village without infringing."

"Confidentially," Laird said, "the dead man back there happens to be a detective sergeant from Brulon. We don't know what business brought him here until we long-distance Brulon. Maybe you'll understand now why the sergeant wasn't feeling friendly. A visiting brother sergeant killed in Oldham City is a black mark against the force, he figures."

"Sure. I just happened to be handy to work it out on." Devon nodded sympathetically. "I hope you get the killer."

"We will," Laird predicted confidently. "He's bottled up. One of our boys heard the shot, glimpsed a crook named Joe Tupper beating it out of the street. They're hot on his heels, a cordon thrown around the district." He shook his head. "Damn queer. Tupper's well known, but it's the first time I've heard of him carrying a gun."

"Thanks for the dope, even though I won't be using it." Devon grinned

again. "Give my love to the sergeant."

Laird answered his grin and turned back. They had reached the corner and a clanging gong cleared a path for a black wagon as Devon worked through the crowd still there.

It took him a few seconds to reach the side street where his sedan was parked. Speculating idly on the motive behind the killing, he slipped under the wheel, pushed home the ignition key. Something round and thin-edged bored into the nape of his neck at the moment, froze him rigid.

"Take it easy, Mister, an' you won't get hurt!" The low voice carried an undercurrent of urgency. "We're goin' places, see?"

Devon lifted bleak eyes to the windshield mirror, studied the face in the shadows behind him. A chalky white face, long and gaunt, with the lips flattened against large teeth and pale eyes that held a desperate gleam of fear.

A whimsical light replaced the bleakness in Devon's gray eyes. He turned slowly, ignoring the pressure at the top of his spine. His left hand jerked out, clamped hard over a thick wrist.

A cynical grin on his harsh features, he said softly: "You underrate my intelligence—Tupper! The only guns I reckon dangerous have metal rims, not wooden ones. Stick the stem back in your pipe bowl and relax."

DEVON'S thrust flung the man against the cushions. He swiveled and inched under the wheel, an overwhelming desire to put one over on Sergeant Honeyman mastering his natural impulse to turn the wanted man in to the police.

There was another reason. Curiosity to learn why Tupper, after just shooting a man, had resorted to such a flimsy make-belief weapon instead of using his gun?

"Better keep low," he admonished over his shoulder. "The police are prowling Fourth and your classic features are as inconspicuous as a neon sign on a dark night."

He heard hot breath hiss behind him, then: "Who the hell are you, Mister? How d'you know me?" the fellow inquired suspiciously.

"Quite simple." Devon punched the starter. "The police are busy looking for one Joe Tupper, have a cordon around this section, and you're hiding a few yards away in my car."

He wheeled the sedan out into the avenue and drove south.

"Uh-h! An' you ain't turnin' me in?" Tupper sounded incredulous.

Devon went eight or nine blocks and swung east onto a deserted street before he spoke.

"Why did you kill him, Tupper?" he asked then, a note of contempt in his voice.

Evidently possessed of a one-track mind, Tupper inquired: "What's the idea, helpin' me get away?"

"I haven't helped you get away." Devon laughed shortly. "Merely prolonged the moment of your arrest. I don't like killers, Tupper, including cop-killers. I'm interested, though, in learning, first-hand, the story behind the killing."

Joe Tupper sighed gustily. "You're a queer cookie, Mister, only you got it all wrong. I didn't kill the dick, but I might jest as well. Me, with a record long as your arm an' spotted beatin' it away from a stiff, it'll be duck soup for a judge an' jury. But I'm tellin' you again, Mister, s'help me I ain't never bumped a guy off yet. I don't even carry a roscoe!"

Devon's cynical smile faded, catching an earnest note in the man's whining voice. Back in Devon's brain was a conviction that Tupper had told the truth.

His eyes, alert and thoughtful, glimpsed the headlights of a car in the reflector and drawing closer. He automatically pulled over to the side of the road, his pulse beating a little faster. Maybe he would take a story out of Oldham City yet!

His mind occupied, he was unprepared when, without warning, Tupper abruptly catapulted out of the

rear seat, bent forward and grabbed the wheel with thick fingers. Before Devon could do anything about it, the sedan swerved across the road.

The driver of the oncoming car yelled a string of curses. Devon could see his face, thin and vicious, twisted in lines of quick terror as the man spun his wheel in a frantic effort to avert a collision.

Swearing softly, the Bloodhound Reporter wrested control of the wheel from Tupper. In the same instant, he saw the ugly snout of a sub-machine gun poking through the open rear window of the plunging car.

CHAPTER II

A COLD clamminess trickled along Devon's spine. But for Joe Tupper's quick dive, that Tommy-gun would have been spitting death at this moment right into the sedan. He jerked the wheel and the sedan crashed into the hood of the death car. He straightened the car out then, sent it roaring ahead. Behind them, a loud crash brought a hard gleam to his cloudy eyes.

"Now why was them torpedoes gunnin' for us?" Tupper's plaintive voice broke a heavy silence. "They got themselves all mixed up with a wall an' busted a nice car."

"Nice work, Joey," Devon said quietly. "We'd both be dead meat now if you hadn't spotted their game. Recognize them?"

"Nope. But they don't belong here," Tupper growled. "Happened to glance through the rear window when I spotted their lights chasing us, saw the driver an' the gorilla with the Tommy-gun all set."

He leaned forward until his narrow chin rested on the back of Devon's seat.

"Ain't no heat on me, Mister," he muttered softly, "'cept the cops back there. Mebbe some tough people don't like the way you part your hair?"

The Bloodhound Reporter shook his head, gray eyes thoughtful. Plenty of

crooks would welcome a chance to go gunning for him. But he hadn't been in Oldham City long enough for any such attempt to be organized, even had he been recognized, which he doubted! His brain considered the only other solution possible.

The killers' quarry was Joe Tupper. In some way, they had known the hunted man was in the sedan, had trailed the car until it turned into a deserted street. Devon decided that a long talk with Tupper was essential.

Fifteen minutes later, Devon braked the car on a lonely street somewhere in the suburbs and switched off the lights.

Joe Tupper ducked out, a thick-set, squat man. He stood shuffling awkwardly on the planked sidewalk until Devon joined him. His pale eyes flickered furtively right and left, as though he contemplated making a dash for freedom.

"No run-out powders, Joey," Devon said grimly. He took the little crook's arm, lifted him back into the tonneau and followed inside. "I want your story, more than ever since our friends tried to leave lead calling cards."

"What's the blinkin' idea, Mister?" The squat man's gaunt face registered suspicion. "Runnin' me out right under the cops' noses jest to hear my story, so you say?"

"I've an abnormal bump of curiosity," Devon told him, smiling softly. "Start talking, Joey."

He studied the man more closely now. The long, bony features bore a slight resemblance to a horse and a melancholy droop to the thin mouth contrasted sharply with a wary gleam in the pale eyes. A sly, cunning face, but not the face of a killer, Devon decided.

Tupper grunted and started to swear loudly, a long stream of profanity that lifted the blond giant's eyebrows. "An' I walked right into this," he whined when he ran out of invectives.

Devon poked a hard finger in the

squat man's chest. "You're still in it," he reminded him harshly.

The little man grimaced, rubbed a none-too-clean hand across his mouth.

"Funny, me startin' out to make some honest dough an' I step into a murder rap!" he grumbled.

"Get down to facts," Devon snapped.

Tupper nodded, went on: "When I spotted Sansen—he's the dick who rubbed out—leavin' the airfield to-night, I guessed he'd flown here to make a pinch. I knew him back in Brulon, an' he don't fly after small stuff, see? So I tailed him, watchin' a chance to tip off the guy he was after. He headed straight for Corinne Street without callin' at headquarters, an' hung around a small printing office that had a light burning inside.

"Mebbe ten or fifteen minutes later, the light went out and a fellow came through the front door. Sansen stepped up to him, said something about being under arrest and then the gun roared!"

"**W**HERE were you?" Devon asked sharply.

"Me?" Tupper swore again, softly and not so long this time. "I'd ducked down some basement steps to watch. Then, like I said, the gun cracked. I saw the flash across the street an' Sansen dropped, so I tailed it toward Fourth, which was my mistake, see? There's a cop on the corner. He went to grab me, but I ducked, slipped among the crowd an' crawled into your car."

"What happened to the man out of the printing office?" The feeling that Tupper was still speaking the truth persisted in Devon's mind.

Tupper scowled, an aggrieved look in his pale eyes. "Him? He shouted, 'The shot came from over there,' when I started running. I knew damn well where it came from, Mister, but I wasn't interested. He musta ducked back in the building or mebbe he beat it the other way. I dunno. I didn't stop to see what happened to him or

to the torpedo what burned Sansen."

"That puts you in the clear, Joey." The Bloodhound Reporter's harsh face wore a thoughtful frown. "All we do is find this chap, and he can testify you didn't fire the shot."

"You don't get it, Mister," Tupper growled disgustedly. "Sansen was arresting him. No, he'll do no alibiing for me. 'Cos why? 'Cos chances are they'll pin the killing on him if he does! No, that guy's goin' to keep his nose clean, see?"

Devon nodded, a sardonic gleam in his gray eyes. His brain was working lightning fast.

"Joey, I've a hunch you spoiled a nice little frameup," he said softly, after a short pause. "Knowing Sansen would be picking this chap up tonight, some one arranged to have him bumped off and fix his murder on this man from the printer's office. You being on the spot and beating it in a hurry upset things. The killer must have trailed you, saw you get into my car, and followed with one of his pals until we hit a quiet street."

"You mean, I had to be put on ice in case I saw the mugg with the gun?" Tupper regarded Devon with wide eyes. "Mister, mebbe you got something, only—I didn't see the guy. An' say, why didn't they rub out this bimbo, Prost—E. Prost, Printer—that's the name was on the window, instead of killing Sansen?"

"They had reasons, Joey, undoubtedly." The blond giant shrugged. "Prost's murder might have opened awkward investigations into something some one wanted kept quiet. But, in jail, charged with murder himself, anything Prost might say would be discredited."

"Say you talk like you believed me, Mister!" There was a hopeful note in Tupper's thin voice.

"Maybe I do. We've got to learn Prost's home address," Devon said quietly. "We're going to have a little talk with him."

He left Tupper in the back and

climbed under the wheel again, a hard gleam in his eyes.

Ten minutes later, Devon came out of a corner drug store, a satisfied smile on his tight lips. "He lives in an apartment block back of Lowden Park," he told Tupper.

"What's your interest in this, Mister?" Tupper wanted to know after the car was rolling smoothly. "It means trouble if you're caught luggin' me around."

Devon grinned crookedly. "I'm a reporter, Joey, not local. A policeman told me not long ago they keep reporters muzzled in Oldham City. I don't like being muzzled and besides, I'm afraid you're booked for a session with a hangman if I stay out."

"You're a regular guy, Mister," Tupper said awkwardly. "Thanks."

"Better keep 'em till we're through," Devon advised him dryly.

He had more on his mind than merely clearing the little crook. He was interested in learning why—if Joey's story was true—some one had apparently tried to frame Prost with Sansen's killing.

Devon was still pondering this angle when the wanted man suddenly leaned forward.

"That's him!" he said hoarsely. "Prost!" His stabbing finger indicated a skulking figure turning hurriedly onto a side street.

DEVON nodded satisfaction. He had been afraid the police might reach the man before he'd a chance to talk with him. Once the Oldham City police learned that Sansen had flown from Brulon to arrest Prost, they would be hot on his trail. He tooled the sedan around the corner, caught Prost's quick backward glance of alarm.

"Hop out and grab him when I pull up, Joey," he said.

Tupper chuckled. "He'll need wings to get away."

But Prost made no attempt to get away. A tall, thin man, he backed slowly against the wall when the lit-

tle crook bounced out of the car and gripped his arm.

Following quickly, Devon saw the printer stiffen, his thin face ashen gray. Lines of worry were etched deeply about the corners of his mouth and networked his eyes, eyes that held a hunted look.

"Take it easy, Prost," Devon murmured. "We're not police. We want a talk with you."

A slight color washed the man's hollow cheeks. His tired eyes fastened on Tupper's gaunt face. He released a slow breath.

"You—aren't you the chap that started to run," he said shakily, "after some one shot Sansen from across the street?"

The little squat man prodded Devon's ribs with a stubby finger and grinned. "Jest like I told you, Mister," he said.

Devon nodded, said: "We'll be safer in the car."

He took Prost's arm, guided him across to the sedan. A puzzled look on his face, Prost took the seat beside Devon while Tupper crawled to cover in the back.

"The police are after Joey, here, for Sansen's killing," Devon said abruptly when the car was moving slowly along the street. "You can clear him, Prost."

Prost flung a startled glance at the little man on the rear seat, licked thin lips furtively. "I—I'm getting out," he muttered and reached for the door handle. "I know nothing about it."

Devon's right hand flashed out, jerked him back from the door. "You know plenty," he snapped. "You don't want to fall into the hands of the police yourself! What was Sansen arresting you for?"

He kept the car crawling while he studied Prost out of one eye. He went on relentlessly when the printer didn't answer:

"All right, I'm turning you over to the police! You'll talk at headquarters. You can't let an innocent man be condemned to die while the real killer

goes free—free to get you next, perhaps!"

"Wait!" Prost cried desperately. "If you turn me in, I'll swear I saw him fire the shot. Oh, you don't understand. I'm on my way home now to pick up a few belongings and get out of town before the police learn about me. You see, I—I'm wanted for murder myself! And like this chap, I'm innocent. But—I can't prove it, yet!"

CHAPTER III

TWO men wanted for murder! Devon whistled softly. And one, he knew, was innocent. The other—if he, too, had been framed, the other man had to be proved innocent before he would clear Joe Tupper. The Bloodhound Reporter's nose quivered.

"Suppose you spill your story," he said softly. "It might throw some light on why Sansen was killed tonight just as he was about to arrest you. I've a hunch that crime was due to be added to your account."

Prost stirred restlessly, stared dull-eyed through the windshield. "Remember the Bracker killing in Brulon, four years ago?" he asked tonelessly.

Devon nodded, the story vaguely familiar in his mind. Bracker, owner and managing editor of a prominent Brulon newspaper, had been found dead in his study, stabbed through the heart. The murderer had never been caught.

"My name was Charles Austin in those days," Prost went on, talking fast now. "I was Bracker's confidential secretary. He was the big man behind the political setup in Brulon, and a grafter. My work had to do with that side of his business. We'd an argument in his office on the afternoon of the night he was murdered.

"A dozen people heard him threaten to fire me. He was quick tempered, but it rarely lasted. That night he phoned me to come to the house, clean up some important work. He admitted me himself, took me into the study and gave me a cigar."

"Make it brief," Devon grunted.

"The doorbell rang, three long and a short," Prost continued, "soon after we'd started working. Bracker had a secret system of signals identifying visitors. He had me wait in the library across the hall while he went to the door. Curious, I left the door open an inch, heard him say, 'Oh, hello. I intended seeing you in the morning.' The visitor laughed, said, 'I've a knack of calling at the right moment.' I closed the door then, heard them go into the study seconds later.

"I worked on some notes I'd taken with me until I thought I heard some one leave the study ten minutes later. I looked in the hallway soon after, saw the study door open and went inside. Bracker was slumped in a chair, the paperknife thrust through his heart. The safe door was open. I remembered then that Bracker had placed fifty thousand dollars in there that morning.

"Dan Smiley was running for State's District Attorney and Bracker was secretly backing him. The money was for campaign funds. I never learned for sure, but had a hunch Bracker held something over Smiley. He wanted one of his puppets in office."

"Get back to the murder," Devon prompted.

"I went over to check the safe, found the money gone. The butler came in then with Bracker's usual ten o'clock tea. He looked at me queerly and muttered, 'So you've killed him!' I remembered the row earlier then, and something else. While talking with Bracker, I'd toyed carelessly with the paperknife.

"Realizing I was in a tight spot, I knocked the butler down when he rushed to grab me and ran out. I managed to get out of town safely and after several weeks drifting and hiding, my appearance changed a little, I came here. I'd a knowledge of printing and bought a small business cheap. Until I saw Sansen waiting outside tonight, I thought I was safe."

"Bracker's visitor—you didn't recognize his voice?" Devon inquired sharply.

Prost—or Austin—shook his head. "No." A quick gleam lit his faded eyes. "I've waited four years to hear it again. When and if I ever do, I shall recognize it."

"**Y**OU thought Bracker had something on Smiley," the Bloodhound Reporter said thoughtfully. "Smiley could have rubbed him out on account of that, taken the fifty grand, seeing how Bracker intended him to have it."

"It wasn't Smiley's voice," Prost said wearily. "And Dan dropped out of the running for D.A. a week later, leaving the field open for the new-comer, Martin Wyndell. No, Dan seemed to go to pieces after Bracker's death. Neglected his practice, sold his house, and finally moved into the poorer district altogether. Sure, I suspected him at first, kept close tab on him through the papers."

"Smiley's chances in the election, were they good?" Devon asked abruptly.

Prost smiled weakly. "He'd have walked in. Wyndell, his opponent, was practically unknown. I'd never seen the man myself. In fact, I haven't seen him yet."

The Bloodhound Reporter drove in thoughtful silence, the germ of an idea crawling through his brain. Fantastic, but—he grinned sardonically. His work thrived on fantastic ideas.

Six minutes later, he braked in front of the small dingy apartment block where Prost roomed.

"Hurry. Get what you need before the police arrive," he told the printer. "Leave by the rear. Joey and I will be in the back lane with the car."

"What are you planning to do with me?" Prost demanded unsteadily. "If you attempt to turn me over to—"

"They'll be here to take you themselves if you don't move fast," Devon said impatiently. "I want you and

Tupper in a safe place while I find out what's behind tonight's work."

On the pavement, Prost turned and stared curiously at Devon. "Who are you?" he muttered. "Your face is familiar."

Devon smiled grimly. "Some people call me the Bloodhound Reporter," he said. "Now, get going."

"I've heard of you." Prost's dull eyes brightened. "I'm trusting you and—thanks. I won't be long."

Devon waited until the man's thin figure disappeared inside the building, then drove around the corner. A minute later, lights doused and engine running noiselessly, the sedan was parked in the back lane shadows of the apartment block.

"You ain't swallowing his tale, are you, Mister?" Tupper inquired abruptly.

Devon nodded shortly without speaking.

The little squat man muttered a soft oath. "Me, I heard every word he said. An' if I was a cop, I'd still pinch him for the job."

"His story was no more improbable than your own." The Bloodhound Reporter laughed cynically. "I didn't believe you on account of your honest face."

"You—you can tell if a guy's spillin' the truth?" Tupper muttered incredulously.

"An understanding of human nature, Joey." Devon's smile faded. "Now you'd take the gold teeth from a dead nigger's mouth, but you'd never kill a man in cold blood."

"Cripes, not me!" The little crook shivered. "An' it ain't 'cos I don't fancy a rope round me neck, not quite."

He subsided in a corner. Devon could hear him sucking his teeth noisily.

"GO FIND him, Joey," Devon said, after ten minutes had elapsed without any sign of Prost. "Suite seven, second floor. If the police are there—" he grinned crookedly—"don't wait."

"I don't like it," Tupper said nervously, but he hopped out of the car and entered the building.

Devon waited restlessly through another five minutes, then he, too, climbed out of the sedan. He slipped through the rear door, found himself in a short hallway. Long strides carried him up the back stairs to the second floor.

The narrow passage was deserted. Suite seven lay at the far end. He moved noiselessly over worn carpet, bent to listen at the door. It opened in the same instant and a thick-set man stood framed there.

The man had hard eyes and was unmistakably a plain-clothes man. He moved fast despite his bulk. A quick jerk pulled Devon inside the room before the Bloodhound Reporter could resist.

"This bird was listening at the door, sarge," the hard-eyed man growled.

Devon straightened leisurely, smiling under Sergeant Honeyman's hot glare. His eyes flicked across to Joe Tupper. The little man was standing by a cheap dresser, shiny handcuffs on his thick wrists, a dejected light in his pale eyes.

The sergeant took a short step forward, the long scar on his blunt face suddenly a dull red.

"So you can't keep your nose out!" he growled. "Looks like you've got some explaining to do, Devon. You've popped up on the scene right after two killings, and both apparently connected. So where d'you fit in?"

His grim eyes left Devon's face, switched to where Prost sat slumped in a faded plush chair.

The blond giant followed the direction of his glance, stared bleakly at the gray powder burns around the hole in Prost's right temple! Devon's eyes traveled slowly down the right arm overhanging the chair arm. They paused for a brief second on the automatic lying on the floor, a silencer screwed on its barrel, then came back to Honeyman's harsh face.

"I don't fit in," he said softly. The

sides of his lean nose twisted slightly, the only outward sign of the perturbation gripping him.

"You show up a few minutes after Sansen is killed," Honeyman rasped. "Now you sneak along to the room where the killer and another guy wanted for murder are holed up! An' one of 'em has just beat the chair by putting a slug in his brain. No, you don't fit in!" He jabbed a stubby finger in Tupper's direction. "You wouldn't know this fellow, of course?"

Devon's casual glance touched the little man's gloomy features carelessly. He shook his head, grinned with an assurance he didn't feel.

"Could hardly forget that face if I'd once seen it," he said. He disregarded the surprised expression in Tupper's depressed eyes, inquired politely: "Who is he?"

"Santa Claus!" Honeyman barked. "An' you're a damn liar!"

Devon's blond head shook reprovingly. "Harsh words, sergeant," he murmured.

"I'm taking you in for questioning, Devon," Honeyman snapped. "Maybe you'll find that funny."

The Bloodhound Reporter shook broad shoulders. Behind his smiling eyes, his brain was busy. Prost's suicide puzzled him. It looked like an admission of guilt. But his mind still clung to the conviction that the printer had spoken the truth, that a frame-up had been built around the dead man. And the few hours Honeyman could hold him in jail would lessen considerably his chances of uncovering the man or men behind that frame-up.

He stood silent while the sergeant instructed his man to phone headquarters, then:

"Doesn't it seem strange that a man committing suicide would use a silencer?" he asked quietly.

Sergeant Honeyman grinned sardonically. "Maybe," he said, "he didn't want to wake the neighbors."

Devon casually strolled across the room, bent over the dead man and

stared at the blackened hole. After a few seconds, he straightened abruptly, a peculiar gleam in his gray eyes. He beckoned the sergeant to join him.

"This chap was murdered, Honeyman!" he said.

CHAPTER IV

SERGEANT HONEYMAN'S lips curled in a sneer. "Yeah," he said dryly. "He was drowned in a bath tub. The whole setup is damn funny—"

"Take a look!" Devon interrupted roughly. "The bullet went in at a slanting downward angle. A man holding a gun to his own temple would either fire straight or at an upward angle. Like this."

He stooped as though to pick up the silenced automatic from the floor, checked himself and in a lightning movement, plucked the holstered gun from Honeyman's shoulder clip.

The sergeant made a grab for the gun, an oath on his tight lips. With reluctant interest in his angry eyes, he dropped his hand when Devon swiftly raised the weapon to his own temple to illustrate his point.

"Whoever shot Prost stood over him," the Bloodhound Reporter murmured. "Examine the wound yourself."

"Then you know who he is!" Honeyman snarled. He hesitated, then complied with Devon's request.

Seconds later, he dribbled a discordant whistle. "Yeah, maybe you're right," he admitted grudgingly, heaving his wide shoulders upright, his eyes swinging to Tupper. "An' maybe we've got the fellow that fixed it!"

He glanced back at Devon. "Seems to me you know plenty about the whole— Drop that gun, Devon!"

Devon held the police positive covering the sergeant's bulky form, a cynical grin flattening his hard lips.

"Step over here with the sergeant!" he ordered the plain-clothes man who had just finished phoning headquarters. His eyes never left Honeyman's purple face.

"Blast you, Devon, I'll make you sorry for this!" the sergeant grated. "Interfering with the police added to the list of charges I'm going to prefer against you."

Devon's blond head shook sadly.

"You'll thank me for preventing you making a fool of yourself," he said gently. He kept the gun muzzle flickering between Honeyman and the sullen detective now reluctantly striding across the room.

"You see," he went on, "Tupper didn't kill Sansen. He merely stepped into a frameup intended to pin that killing on Prost, spoiled the setup. So, for some urgent reason, Prost had to be eliminated—quick!"

"You're a fool, Devon!" Honeyman said harshly. "Drop the gun an' we'll forget that part. There'll be a squad car here any minute. You can't get away."

"I think I can. I'm interested only in two things, sergeant," Devon said grimly. "Bringing guilty criminals to justice and getting a story. I mean to do both tonight. I'm busting that frameup and clearing Tupper, if I have to shoot a dozen thick-headed policemen to do it! If you think I'm fooling, order your man to go for his gun. Now, face about, quick!"

The two men hesitated. For a tense moment, Devon thought his bluff had failed. He raised the gun a threatening inch. Feet shuffling awkwardly, the two detectives heeled sullenly, then. Honeyman was the last to turn, an ugly snarl on his thick lips, the scar on his face a flaming brand.

Devon stepped behind the plain-clothes man, scooped the man's gun from its holster and pocketed it. He said:

"Now, drop the key to those handcuffs behind you!"

The key jangled to the floor.

SECONDS later, released from his manacles, the grinning Tupper ironed Honeyman's right wrist to his companion's left hand under Devon's curt orders. The thin scream of a siren

drawing rapidly near brought a gleam to Devon's cloudy eyes.

"We're going out by the rear stairs," he said softly. "If either of you squawk, it's going to be too bad!"

"What you gonna do with 'em now?" Tupper inquired curiously when the two prisoners had been marched into the back lane under threat of their own guns.

"Yeah, what?" Honeyman gritted. "This is kidnaping."

"You're out of circulation for a few hours," Devon said softly. "I need that long without every lawman in the state at my heels. Now, climb in back of the car with Tupper before the whole police force come looking for you. Rap the first one making a wrong move over the skull, Joey!"

Tupper grinned. "It'll be a pleasure, boss," he murmured.

After the prisoners were loaded, the Bloodhound Reporter tooled the car out of the lane. He rolled swiftly toward the East Side, a thoughtful frown on his harsh face. If his hunch failed him, he could expect no mercy from Honeyman. Kidnaping in this state carried a twenty year sentence.

Devon questioned Tupper over his shoulder. He followed certain directions, and ten minutes later braked in front of a dilapidated warehouse on one of the East Side's dark streets.

Ignoring Honeyman's lurid curses, between them, Devon and his squat companion herded the manacled police officers inside the musty building. They went down rickety wooden steps that led to a dank-smelling cellar. A dim grayness filtered in through two dust-covered windows to relieve the thick blackness.

Another pair of handcuffs from the sergeant's pocket served to clip an ankle of each man together.

"I'm leaving you with them, Joey," Devon said. "Keep 'em quiet until I return. If things go right, I'll have a line on the man who engineered Sansen's killing in a few hours."

"You mean, you know who he is?" Tupper asked incredulously.

Devon smiled thinly. "I think I do."

A curious gleam shone in Honeyman's narrowed eyes, as he growled: "Damned if I don't think you're in earnest, Devon!"

The Bloodhound Reporter sighed expansively. "I've been trying to convey that impression," he said. "But for me, you'd have Joey headed for the hangman's noose and another innocent man buried as a killer. Believe it or not, Prost didn't kill Bracker. I'm getting a lot of fun proving you wrong, Honeyman. But, if it will ease your hurt dignity, I promise to let you in on the finish. Meanwhile, you'll stay here with Joey. And I'm borrowing your credentials, sergeant."

Honeyman scowled, then his tight lips parted in a wry grin. "Make it snappy," he grunted. "I got lumbago, an' this damn place smells damp to me."

Devon pushed through the swinging doors of the Hotel Regal twenty minutes later. He strode across to the desk, asked questions of the dignified clerk there. The sergeant's badge brought him the information that the man he sought had not yet returned to the hotel.

He lounged in the crowded lobby for several minutes before taking an elevator to the eighth floor. He walked the two flights up to the tenth floor.

The thick carpet deadened the sound of his feet as he followed the corridor to a large suite. Keeping a watchful eye on the passage, he worked swiftly with a slender, peculiarly shaped piece of steel on one of the doors. It swung open three minutes later and Devon stepped inside the apartment.

A thorough search of the three rooms revealed nothing of interest, but Devon gave no sign of disappointment. Whistling softly, he switched out the lights, strolled into the bedroom and draped his lean figure over the bed. Eyes closed, he lay in the darkness for nearly an hour.

At the end of that time, the sound of a door opening brought him up

stiffly, nerves abruptly taut, ears keened. He listened intently for ten seconds, then relaxed. Satisfied that only one person had entered the apartment, he slid noiselessly off the bed, headed for the connecting door.

THROUGH the open doorway, he watched the man in the other room deposit a brief case on the table, then cross over to a buffet and pour a drink from a gleaming decanter.

Devon stepped inside the room and coughed softly. The man whirled swiftly, the smile on his florid face fading to a look of alarm when he saw the gun in Devon's hand.

He was a big man, portly, without a paunch. His heavy face with a ruthless sweep of jaw-line held an air of power. Gray and cloudy like a mountain mist, his eyes betrayed a quick uneasiness, staring at Devon. After a short pause, the man's tautness lessened. He set the glass in his hand down hard on the buffet's marble top.

"What's the meaning of this intrusion?" he demanded sharply.

"It's supposed to look like a stick-up—" Devon wagged the gun playfully—"but you guess. Keep away from that phone!" he snapped.

The big man quit edging toward the desk phone. "Do you realize who I am?" he asked savagely. "This is an—"

"I know, it's an outrage," Devon interrupted. "Maybe this will help you forget it."

He stepped in close, whirled an unexpected left hook to the big man's square chin. The impact jarred his arm clear up to the shoulder, but the man was out before he hit the carpet.

Devon shook his left hand, grinned ruefully and dropped to his knees. He went through the unconscious man's pockets carefully. When he finally arose, he had retained only a small key taken from a flapped pocket in a wallet.

A minute later he strolled out of the apartment, walked the ten flights down. In the lobby, he stepped inside

a pay phone booth. When he came out, he had chartered a plane for an immediate flight to Brulon, a round trip of three hundred miles.

It was almost midnight when he left the hotel, his lean face grim.

The cold gray of dawn was streaking the sky when the plane brought Devon back to Oldham City. He strode into the airfield waiting room, and over to a phone booth. After inserting a nickel in the pay phone, he dialed the Hotel Regal, gave the switchboard operator a room number.

"Sorry," the operator informed him, "but no calls can go through to that room unless they're urgent."

"This," Devon said gently, "is probably the most urgent call the gentleman has ever received. Now, hurry, please."

The line buzzed three times, each longer than the other, before a sleep-drenched voice demanded thickly:

"Well, what is it?"

"Remember me?" the Bloodhound Reporter murmured. "The stick-up man! I thought you'd be interested to learn I've just returned from a flying trip to Brulon. While there, under the impression I was a police officer acting on your instructions, your secretary kindly opened your private safe."

A savage outburst interrupted him from the other end. He grinned crookedly.

"In case you didn't miss it," he said, after a short pause, "I—borrowed the little key from your wallet, found some very interesting papers in the locked compartment of your safe!"

The curses still burning the wire ended abruptly in a startled gasp. "You—you have those papers?" The man's voice held quick alarm. "What's behind all this? Blackmail?"

"Why not?" Devon inquired thinly. "You've been practicing it for four years. Now, suppose we say, fifty grand to put those papers back in your safe?"

"Who are you working for?" the urgent voice demanded. "Dan Smiley?"

"I'm a lone wolf," Devon said mockingly. "What's the answer?"

"We—we can't discuss it over the telephone. You'd better come up to my suite."

The Bloodhound Reporter smiled grimly. "I'll be there in an hour," he promised. "And—without the papers, in case you have any funny ideas."

He left the airfield, caught a taxi and was driven to within a block of the warehouse where Tupper was guarding Sergeant Honeyman and his companion. He walked the remainder of the distance and disappeared inside the building.

Devon was smiling widely when he came out, fifteen minutes later.

CHAPTER V

THE large rotunda of the Hotel Regal was deserted when the Bloodhound Reporter strolled through a few minutes before six-thirty. He crossed to the elevator bank, found one in operation and stepped inside.

A sleepy-eyed youngster yawning over a magazine dropped it and rode them swiftly to ten. The door of the suite where he had paid his earlier nocturnal visit opened at Devon's first ring.

Clad in a heavy blue dressing gown, the big man who had met Devon's fist during that first call scowled and motioned the blond giant inside.

Devon grinned when he saw two other visitors were in the room. He recognized one as the hatchet-faced driver of last night's death car. The other one was rawboned, lean, and hard-featured, with a long strip of adhesive tape running from his left eye down to his chin. Devon guessed him to be the man who had been behind the machine gun.

The Bloodhound Reporter lowered himself into a deep leather chair, his harsh face tight, and surveyed the three men leisurely.

"No hard feelings over last night, I hope?" he murmured to none of them in particular.

"We're here to talk business," the big man snapped. "I want those papers, and I intend to have them!"

"And the fifty grand?" Devon asked.

A dirty laugh answered him.

Devon shrugged. "I wonder which of these two headlines you prefer? 'Martin D. Wyndell, candidate for governor held up and robbed by armed thug!' Or perhaps this, 'Candidate for governor arrested on four-year-old charge of murder!'"

"What d'you mean by that?" Wyndell snarled. His large florid face lost some of its color.

"You're a killer, Wyndell!" Devon

by the butler was another break for you. You put pressure on Smiley, forced him out of the fight. Even that didn't satisfy you.

"You bled the poor devil of everything he had, all for one little mistake he'd made years before. And Austin would have died for your crime, had he been caught. But he outsmarted you and the police—until last night. You've always been afraid he might have heard your voice that night, would hear it again some day and recognize you."

"Pure guess work." Wyndell laughed uneasily. "But it won't help you. Even with the papers, you could



said harshly. "The papers I found in your safe were taken from Bracker's safe the night you murdered him. Financing Dan Smiley's campaign, Bracker was holding those papers over him with the idea of running the D.A.'s office once Smiley was elected. You learned of it somehow, saw a way to eliminate Smiley from the election and leave a clear field for yourself."

"I'm not interested in fairy tales," Wyndell spat viciously. "The papers, you—"

Devon waved him silent. "You visited Bracker that night," he went on relentlessly, "and carried out your plan to kill him and grab the papers. The fifty grand there was extra. Austin being in the house and seen later

never prove a word of that story. The important thing is, you've walked into a trap. I phoned the boys after you called, brought them here by the service elevator. You'll be damn glad to tell where you've planted the papers after they get through with you! All right, Bradley, work him over. The room's soundproof!"

The Bloodhound Reporter smiled confidently. He ignored the two thugs crowding forward, leather saps swinging in their hands.

"**B**BETTER hear the rest, Wyndell," he said easily. "And I think your two gorillas will be interested. You see, one of the boys made a bad slip last night."

The hatchet-faced man paused uncertainly, glanced quickly at his companion.

"You fools!" Wyndell snapped, a black scowl darkening his full face. "He's bluffing. Get the job over."

Hatchet-face shook his head. "Ain't no hurry," he growled. "Let him talk."

Devon grinned bleakly at the big man.

"Your fears were realized when you arrived in Oldham City yesterday to begin your campaign. You spotted Austin—or Prost. There was a danger he would hear and recognize your voice over the radio. You had to work fast. You long-distanced Sansen, tipped him off where he'd find Prost, fixed a time for the arrest, and then brought in these two thugs from Brulon. You arranged for them to shoot Sansen just as he was arresting Prost and then frame the poor devil with the killing.

"It would have worked but for Joe Tupper accidentally spoiling the setup. Your thugs saw him sneak into my car, followed and tried to get him in case he'd seen the killer. When that failed, they did the next best thing. Waited for Prost in his rooms and put him out of the way, leaving it appear a suicide. And that's where they slipped!"

"The hell we did!" Hatchet-face snarled. "It was a—"

"Quiet, you fool!" Wyndell shouted. Devon laughed softly.

"You boys plastered Prost's prints all over the gun—the same one burned Sansen, wasn't it? But one of you left his own prints all over the magazine when he loaded the gun. The police, figuring Prost took the easy way out, haven't attached any importance to those prints—yet! But a word from me and—"

"You're a liar!" the man with the plastered face accused thinly. "I loaded the gun before I got Sansen an' I wiped the magazine, didn't I, Brad?"

"I ain't sure," the hatchet-faced Bradley muttered nervously. "Maybe you didn't, Ed."

Devon's gray eyes glinted. "So Ed's the double killer. It'll cost you a little more for keeping him out of the chair, Wyndell."

"Damn you!" Wyndell exploded savagely. "The papers are relatively unimportant. If necessary I can explain how they came into my safe."

Devon's blond head shook. "Not when Smiley swears how you used them to blackmail him right after Bracker was murdered. And that Bracker held them in his possession until the night of his murder!"

Wyndell drew a gun from his dressing gown pocket. "The papers! Where are they?" he snarled.

"I figured you'd try a double-cross." Devon laughed softly. "The papers are in a safe place along with the story. Anything happens to me, they'll drop into the right hands!"

"I killed Bracker for those papers!" Wyndell said thickly. "Only he died quickly. Not the way you'll go out, unless you talk fast!"

"How about a deal?" Devon said smoothly.

Wyndell considered silently for a few seconds, a speculative gleam in his eyes. He nodded, then. "I'll give you five thousand and not a cent more."

"Hey, wait, now!" Ed stepped forward, a hot light flaming in his eyes. "The damned papers might put you in the clear, but while this mugg lives, he can send me to swing!"

"Take it easy," Wyndell snapped. "Once he gets paid, he won't talk."

"I ain't givin' him the chance!"

Ed's arm flashed up. The gun in his right hand lined Devon's lean body for an instant, then spat flame.

Devon flung sideways in the chair. The lightning move saved his life. He felt burning pain sting his left shoulder, then Sergeant Honeyman's harsh voice snapped out from the bedroom door.

"Drop the guns! All of you, quick!"

Ed whirled, the gun in his hand barking again.

The sergeant shot a fractional sec-

ond faster. The killer's arm flopped useless to his side, the weapon falling to the carpeted floor. Bradley's gun followed an instant later.

WYNDELL'S big frame seemed suddenly to shrink inside the heavy gown. His thick lips twitched and his eyes bulged with quick desperate fear, staring at the small group of men behind Honeyman. The hand holding his gun dropped to his side.

"So you were behind this, Smiley?"

With a gleam lighting his faded eyes, the man Wyndell singled out detached himself from the group. He had been tall once, but stooped shoulders had robbed him of inches. He smiled thinly.

"Only as a spectator," he said quietly. "Four years ago you finished ruining what Bracker had left of my life, only you were more thorough, Wyndell. It has been worth it all for this moment. At this gentleman's request—" he nodded at Devon—"I was present along with the Brulon commissioner of police when your safe was opened. I identified papers found there as some Bracker had had in his safe the night he died."

"That can all wait," Honeyman growled. "Drop your gun, Wyndell. The game's up. Half a dozen witnesses heard you admit to killing Bracker. That and the papers and Smiley's evidence will convict you! Take him, boys."

A couple of plain-clothes men stepped forward.

Wyndell's gun-hand moved, but not downwards. It jerked up to his temple. A distorted grin twisted his lips.

"You're wrong," he snarled. "You'll never convict me in court!"

He pulled the trigger.

AFTER the two killers, Bradley and Ed, were taken away, Sergeant Honeyman joined the Bloodhound Reporter. Devon stood staring down at Wyndell's dead body, a curious smile twisting his thin lips.

The sergeant cleared his throat

noisily. "Umm-m! Nice work, Devon," he muttered awkwardly. "I—I guess I owe you those thanks." He touched Wyndell's limp arm with his toe. "Funny, these big guys can't face the publicity of a trial. Well, maybe he did the best thing."

"More than you realize, sergeant," Devon said quietly. "A good lawyer would have put up a stiff fight, with the issue in grave doubt."

Sergeant Honeyman shook his head emphatically. "With those papers, he hadn't a chance!"

"But—there aren't any papers," Devon told him blandly. "When I read what was contained in them, I turned them over to Smiley, supplied the match that destroyed them. The poor devil had suffered enough on account of the blackmail dope."

The scar on Honeyman's face turned a deep purple.

"Blast you, Devon," he rasped. "That's tampering with evidence. I—I'll—"

"I wasn't working for the police, Honeyman." Devon's harsh face tightened. "I went out to clear Joe Tupper and Prost, and grab me a story."

His gray eyes suddenly twinkled. He tapped Honeyman's arm. "Headlines, sergeant. Headlines! Like this: 'Working with Detective Sergeant Honeyman, the Bloodhound Reporter exposes—'" He broke off, shrugged wide shoulders and grinned cynically. "You should worry. Wyndell's admission will stand now he's dead. And you've still got the other two killers."

Honeyman's hard eyes abruptly lost their anger and a slow smile crawled over his lips.

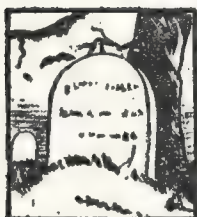
"You're damned clever, Devon," he admitted. "You guessed he'd take this way out. That's why you insisted we didn't show up until you'd tricked him into a confession. A setup with Death!"

Devon rubbed his chin thoughtfully. "I must remember to send you a sure cure for lumbago when I get back to a real town, sergeant," he murmured.

Two cagey killers thought they had figured all the angles in a . . .

Design for a Headstone

By Edward James



IT WAS a bare shelter, hidden deep among the mass of towering firs, rotted boards slapped together into walls and a roof.

Ben Starkey, big, thick-chested, with a black beard-stubbed face, sat on an overturned soap box and twirled the dial of a tiny portable radio. Music and talk squeaked from the box as he sought a news broadcast.

His companion, a bony man with bulging myopic eyes kept pacing about the room in short jerky steps. Smoke drifted back from the cigarette which drooped listlessly from the corner of his petulant mouth. Rabbit-ears Hallock was a hit-and-run killer. He liked to get his money in advance, do his job, and blow the city before the echo of his compact Colt automatic had died out.

His services could be bought by any racketeer throughout the country who desired the elimination of some annoying competitor. This was his first job of smoking out somebody big, somebody top line—a well-known society matron.

The heat was on, but he couldn't leave. He had to hang around and it was getting him down. He didn't like it and—

Ben Starkey's little radio captured the local station. There was something about a convoy sinking and then the newscaster was saying:

"Tragedy struck swift and terrible last night against one of our most illustrious Back Bay families. Mrs. Lennox Hynes, wife of the well-known

banker, was brutally shot and killed during a holdup of the Hynes limousine.

"Mr. and Mrs. Hynes were returning at midnight from the Society Club, and had just pulled up before their Essex Street mansion, when two thugs darted from the shrubbery skirting the lawn, pushed pistols into the car and demanded Mrs. Hynes' jewelry.

"The chauffeur tried to start the car again and several shots were fired, one of which struck Mrs. Hynes in the right temple, instantly killing her. The chauffeur was fatally injured and died on his way to the hospital.

"The police have cast a dragnet over the city and environs. Police Chief Garson expects to report a capture within twenty-four hours. According to the story given by Mr. Hynes, who is under a doctor's care for severe mental shock, the gunmen were very young, evidently inexperienced boys committing their first crime. It is—"

Ben Starkey flipped the switch and laughed aloud. "Boys pulling off their first crime," he mimicked. "That's hot, ain't it, Rabbit?"

A smile tugged at Hallock's lips. "Yeah, calling you a boy, eh, Benny, when you'll never see forty again."

STARKEY chuckled complacently and slid back against the wall, feet outstretched. Rabbit-ears Hallock resumed his nervous pacing around the room.

Starkey said without moving his lips: "Jeez! Sit down, can't you?"

Hallock paused and the cigarette jerked as he dragged hard. "No. This place gives me the willies. Why'n hell

TSD

don't Hynes show up with the dough?"

Starkey pulled a cheap dollar watch from his pocket, glanced at it. "About fifteen minutes," he said. "Then we can blow. What's eating you, Rabbit?"

Hallock squinted his eyes against the upward swirl of smoke. "I don't like it, is all."

"What don't you like?"

"Killing this dame."

Starkey's eyes narrowed. "Her husband's paying us ten grand for the job, ain't he?"

"Yeah, sure," Hallock answered, "but this kind of work doesn't fit up our alley. We knock off some cheap hood and the cops'll let it go without raising too much of a smell. They're glad to get him out of the way. But you check out some dame from a ritzy family with lots of lettuce and they'll beat their brains out finding us."

Starkey cracked his thick knuckles. "Take it easy, Rabbit. We're in the clear. Didn't Hynes arrange the whole setup? Didn't he give the cops a wrong steer on our descriptions? And if the worst comes to worst and they pick us up, he'll fail to identify us. Otherwise they'd stretch his neck right along with ours. What more do you want?"

"This. Why'n hell didn't he pay us and let us hit right out for the Coast?"

Laughter rumbled deep in Starkey's throat. "Because he's a banker, that's why. They're a hard lot, Rabbit. They like to see what they're getting before they pay for it. Maybe this Hynes has a little blonde stashed away in some love nest. Or maybe he was just tired of the old girl. I don't know. Anyway he gives us the job and a thousand bucks to bind the bargain. He promises to meet us out here in this shack with another ten grand after everything is finished. Maybe he was afraid if he paid in advance we'd lam out with the money and not murder the old girl."

Hallock took the cigarette out of his mouth and rolled it between his fingertips. "I still don't like it, Benny. Sometimes these guys crack under the strain. The cops get suspicious and

start asking questions and first thing you know he'll become panicky and spill his guts. He'll talk and they'll pick us up. I don't like it."

Starkey shook his head, still smiling. "No, they won't, Rabbit."

He spoke with such confident conviction that Hallock's eyes jerked up and shot him an inquisitive look.

"What do you mean, Benny?"

The gun that suddenly appeared in Starkey's broad palm seemed to come from nowhere. He patted the dull blue barrel, and said in slow, measured words: "Just this. Hynes ain't ever going to squeal. He won't even be able to open his mouth."

Hallock's lips crawled into a wide grin. "I get it, Benny. We're gonna take the ten G's and then shut him up—for good."

Starkey was beaming in the glory of Hallock's admiration. "That's right. Or maybe you'd like to pump one into him."

"Sure, sure," Rabbit-ears Hallock said eagerly. "You just keep talking to him, Benny, and I'll drift around behind him. His brains'll be leaking before he ever knows what hit him."

Scarcely had the two men completed arrangements when they heard the purr of a motor a short distance away. It choked short, endowing the silence to chirping crickets. Seconds later twigs crackled under the tread of heavy feet.

Ben Starkey replaced the gun and said: "Here he comes."

Hallock grinned. "Come on, sucker," he breathed and opened the door.

LENNOX HYNES carried the portly distinguished air of a man of affairs. Square-faced, chiseled features, he was impeccably attired. He came in, beaming.

"Everything went smooth as syrup," he said. "Well, I guess you boys can leave town now."

Hallock remarked dryly: "We haven't any carfare."

They all laughed at that.

Hynes drew out a heavy manila en-

velope and extended it to Starkey. Blunt fingers riffled crisply through a thick sheaf of hundred dollar bills. He had asked for small denominations. Hynes watched him count it and at Starkey's final nod of approval, rubbed his hands and said:

"Let's have a drink on a job well done." The hammered silver flask he produced was a work of art. He patted it fondly. "Scotch. Twenty years old. My own private stock."

Rabbit-ears Hallock snatched at the flask and tilted it to his mouth. His Adam's apple made several rapid round trips and he came up flushed and breathing hard. Starkey took it then, poured a long drink down his throat. He was thinking that he would keep the silver flask as a sort of bonus on this job.

Hallock was starting to edge slowly around behind the banker, so Starkey began to talk.

"You got guts, Hynes, real guts. Lots of guys don't like their wives, yet they stick it out and suffer all their lives. I gotta hand it to you."

Hynes complacently shrugged off the compliment. "It's nothing. I simply figure all the angles. A plan carefully thought out in advance and well executed never carries repercussions. It's like lending money to—" He stopped short and shrugged. "Oh, well, let's not go into that."

Rabbit-ears Hallock was almost behind him now.

Starkey pressed on. "Yeah, but suppose we showed up later and wanted more money."

Hynes lifted his brows. "You mean blackmail?"

"Yeah."

"You wouldn't do that," Hynes smiled.

"Why not?"

Hallock was reaching into his shoulder rigged holster for his gun.

"Well," said Hynes, "you just wouldn't, that's all. For one thing you're in this thing as deeply as I am. It's too dangerous. And then blackmail is not your racket. The man who recommended you to me said you were —er—strictly killers." He touched a finger wisely to the side of his nose. "You won't blackmail me. I know."

"It was just an idea," Starkey said. "And not a bad one, only you—"

Hallock's shot blasted through the shack, making the rotted boards vibrate. Lennox Hynes' smile froze on his lips, and he arched his back an instant, swaying and staring glassily. Then he rolled slowly forward to the floor. . . .

The following day the *Evening Bulletin* carried the story under a banner headline:

BANKER MURDERED—LENNOX HYNES SHOT THROUGH BACK

Lennox Hynes, noted banker, whose wife was killed early Tuesday, was himself the victim of gunmen's bullets in an obscure shack four miles outside the city limits. The police are unable to explain the mystery shrouding his death.

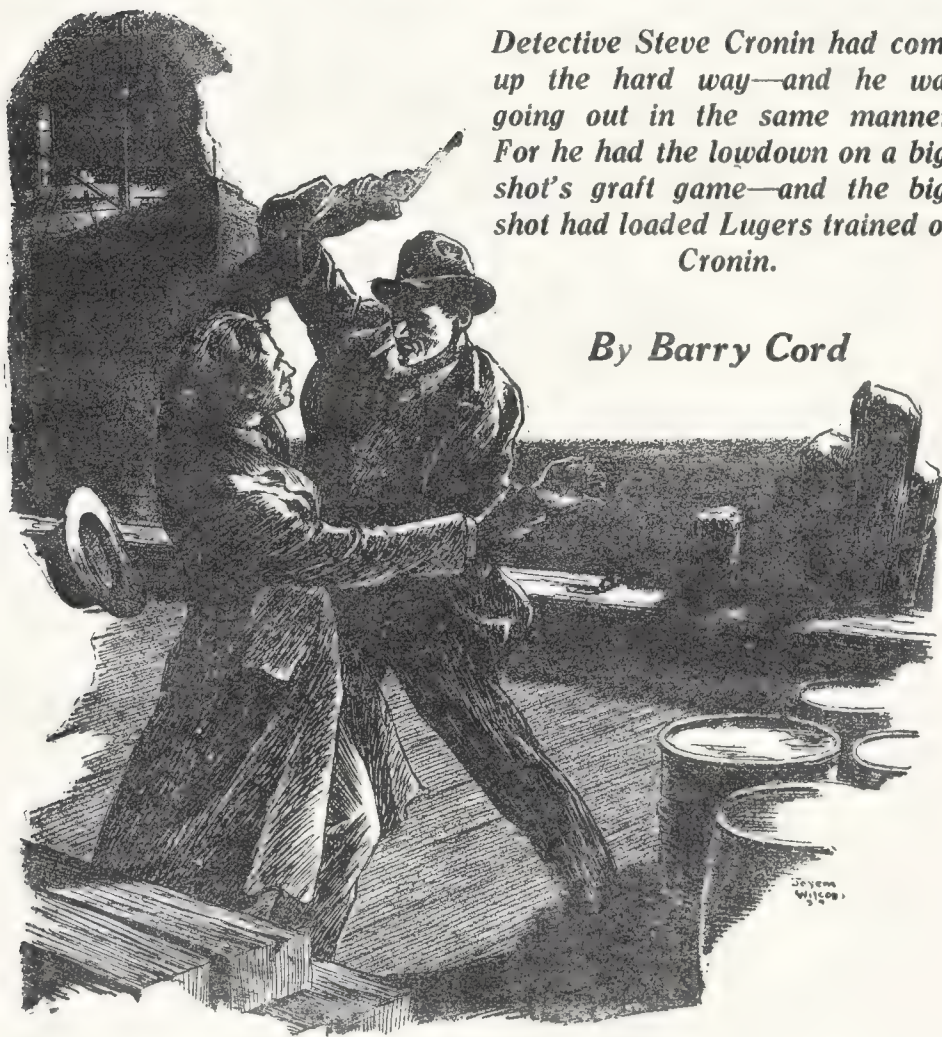
Two men, identified as professional killers, were found beside him, both dead from arsenic poisoning. Traces of the deadly poison were discovered in a flask of Scotch whisky lying on the floor between them. . . .



Vengeance on the Waterfront

Detective Steve Cronin had come up the hard way—and he was going out in the same manner. For he had the lowdown on a big-shot's graft game—and the big-shot had loaded Lugers trained on Cronin.

By Barry Cord



STEVE CRONIN put a palm flat on his window sill, and let his fingers dig into the wood as he stared down on the white-blanketed street. A long black rakish sedan was swinging in close to the curb. Snow danced in swirling, glittering

rhythm in the headlights' beam. It made a foggy veil about the street light on the corner. Out in the bay a foghorn tooted dismally, steadily.

Cronin watched a dapper man in tight-fitting black Chesterfield slide out from under the wheel, come up the

apartment house steps. Gritty snow bounced from a hard black Homburg.

On the mantel over the fireplace a pilot-wheel chime clock banged out nine metallic strokes. Cronin straightened at this, shifted his eyes to the clock face.

He was a big, solid man. His face was flat planed, strong, and in it his eyes were gray, a little narrowed, very steady. His lips were long, good humored. They went with the solid, hard slant of his jaw, the latent power in his thick frame.

Nine P.M. An hour since Lance had phoned. Had promised to be at Cronin's apartment in ten minutes, with evidence that would blow the rotten buildings racket sky high.

He rubbed the knuckles of his right hand thoughtfully across his jaw, and little worried lights came into his eyes. He waited for the dapper man to come up, his back to the window, his hands thrust deep in his pockets.

The buzzer rang two minutes later. Cronin said, "Come in," a little heavily.

The dapper entrant was small, wiry. His name was Robert E. Keene, and he was the assistant district attorney. He was in charge of the buildings racket investigation, and Cronin worked for him, out of the D.A.'s office. He had thin, ruthless features, a hard mouth, and he had pushed his way up fast in the last four years. There was talk of his ousting Frank Barrat, the present D.A., in the coming elections. . . .

Keene closed the door firmly, hunched his shoulders. He looked around the living room, his blue, diamond hard eyes cold, unfathomable. He started to pull a yellow pigskin glove from his right hand, stopped. His eyes steadied on Cronin, and he said:

"Where is he, Steve?"

Steve pulled his hands out of his pockets, and frowned. "I don't know." His voice was short, worried. "He was due here just after eight. He sounded excited and nervous over the phone.

He said what he had was dynamite, and he wanted me to handle it." Steve shrugged, turned away. He began to walk up and down the room, his stride short and choppy.

KEENE moved over to the club chair, took off his coat and Homburg, laid them carefully on the chair. He faced Steve, his brittle face hard and remote. "I'd say he's giving you the run-around, Steve. We've been working on the Kelzeck case since he was murdered, standing on the corner of Cedar and Court. So has Homicide.

"Captain John Stearn would give his right arm to break that case before we do. His men have searched Kelzeck's flat, gone over his offices in the Brunswick Building with a fine toothed comb. And found nothing. Nothing to even connect him with Big Bill Massity, head of Building Materials, Inc."

The Assistant D.A. shrugged, his lips edging into a faint frown. "Yet you say this private shamus friend of yours called you up, an hour ago, with a yarn about having a memo book of Louie Kelzeck's, with names and information that will bring the men behind the buildings racket into the open. It don't add up, Steve."

Cronin stopped his restless pacing. "Maybe, Keene," he said harshly. "But I know Lance. He wouldn't have phoned me, like he did—"

The short *br-r-ring* of the phone stopped him. He swung away from Keene, his shoulders tight against his coat. He reached the small table in three long strides, snatched up the combination. Keene bent his wiry frame over the round table, watching his hands deep in his snappy blue serge coat pockets.

Cronin said: "Yeah—Steve. Lance? Hell, I was—Yeah—sure—" His hard jaw tightened, and a dangerous glint came into his eyes. He nodded again, said: "Right away. Corner of Grove, on Acushnet Avenue. Sit tight!"

Keene straightened, his pale cheeks

tight, showing little hollows. He said: "Cronin—what's up?"

Steve was disappearing into the bedroom. His voice, short and curt, came back to the dapper D.A. man. "Lance. He's in a jam. Couple of Mas-si-si's hoods nearly blasted him on the way down to my apartment—" Steve came out of the bedroom, pulling on a worn, tan trenchcoat, sliding a Luger automatic into one of the pockets. He was still talking. "Lance got clear, ducked down an alley, and spent a half hour shaking the rats. He's at a drug store, on the corner of Grove and Acushnet Avenue. Wants me to pick him up there."

He was crossing the room to the door when Keene said: "I'll go with you, Steve. My car's at the curb. If Lance's really got that dope we'll put one over on Stearn he'll never live down."

Steve shrugged. "I ain't thinking of Stearn. If something happens to Lance—"

His jaw was hard, knotted, as he opened the door and went out. Keene got into his Chesterfield and Hom-burg, paused a moment before the wall mirror and adjusted his tie. His eyes were cold with that hard brilliant stare that was unreadable. He snapped off the light, and caught Steve at the elevator.

GRITTY snow stung Cronin's face. The wind was strong off the bay, whipping the flakes in driving flurries against the apartment buildings. The snow was piling up in drifts in the lee of that rising wind, and few cars were on the streets. The foghorn out by King's Shoals was deep-toned, insistent. It promised to be one hell of a night.

Steve went down to the sedan and got in the front seat. Keene walked rapidly around the front of the car, and was under the wheel before Cronin settled back on the cushions.

Steve said, "Step on it, Keene!" and leaned forward, his eyes probing the swirling snow curtain ahead.

Keene pressed the starter button. The powerful motor caught, coughed once, and steadied to a deep roar. The D.A. man slid it into gear and the rear tires spun, without traction, before the big car finally eased away from the curb snow and moved down the street.

They rode in silence. Heavy bursts of snow rattled against the V windshield. The twin wipers worked steadily, clearing double fan-shaped areas on the glass. The whir of tires, even the small, ordinary body rattles, seemed smothered by the white blanket. The long hooded car seemed to glide forward in a hushed white world that held only the howl of the storm and the monotonous *drag, drag, drag* of the wipers.

Steve sat tensed, staring ahead, seeing in the snow veil the lean, restless features of Lance Boardman. Seeing the quick, eager curl of his mobile lips, the brown eager eyes, the way he moved his hands when he talked. That was the way he would always remember Lance. . . .

They made a couple of turns and were on Acushnet Avenue now. A long straight thoroughfare through a dilapidated part of town. Grimy tenements and small frowzy stores huddled dark and unprotesting along both sides of the street. Occasionally a red and blue neon marked out a cheap hole-in-the-wall tavern.

Steve's fingers tightened on the panel. "That's it, Keene!" he muttered harshly. "Next intersection." He leaned forward, his voice peaking up sharply. "That looks like Lance, coming out to the corner. Swing into Grove, and we'll pick him up!"

Keene nodded.

Steve's eyes were bright, watchful, on the tall thin figure waiting at the curb. A trenchcoat flapped against Lance's gangly legs. He was peering up the avenue, a crumpled felt hat pulled low over his eyes, when the headlights of the swinging sedan hit him.

For a startled instant he stood stiff.

Then he started to whirl. Started to duck back toward the drug store.

LANCE'S knees seemed to give, even before he completed the turn. He went down slowly, still twisted around. There was no sound. Just Lance, crumpling up slowly, as if he had suddenly grown very tired. But Steve, pulled half out of his seat, a strange sound rasping in his throat, saw, before the headlights beam of the swinging sedan flicked off him, that Lance's face was shocked and drawn.

Steve was out of the car before it had stopped skidding under locked brakes. He pounded across the street to the huddled figure on the curb, bucking the stinging snow that bit into his hard face. His right hand was jammed in his coat pocket, tight about the cold butt of his Luger, and his eyes were shiny and hot with the urge to kill.

But he saw no one about; the intersection was dark, deserted. The driving snow glinted coldly in the pale light from the drug store windows.

Steve reached the huddled figure, bent over him. Lance was lying on his side, his legs drawn up in front of him. His crumpled felt lay a foot away. His coat flapped open in the driving wind, and Steve saw the dark bloodstains that spoiled the stripes of his blue shirt.

He lifted Lance's head up in his arms, his gaze moving from the empty street, the dark building fronts, to Lance's gray, pinched face.

He said: "Lance—" His voice was choked up, ragged. "Lance—"

The thin figure stirred in his arms, made a convulsive movement. Gray eyes opened, stared with glazed expression into Steve's knotted face. A faint light finally penetrated the murkiness of them.

"Steve—" Lance murmured, his head lolling. "Steve—Redtop cab—Jan—Jand—"

He died without finishing, without a tremor to show life was gone. His

mouth remained parted, and his eyes stared up at Steve, gray and cold—and without depth.

Steve looked down at that thin, pinched face, a lump raw and harsh in his throat. He didn't glance up as Keene pounded up to them. The dapper D.A. man stood on the balls of his feet, his right hand in his pocket, his eyes swiveling from the deserted intersection down to the dead man in Steve's arms. His voice was quick, sharp, with a strange rasp to it.

"That memo of Kelzeck's, Steve? Has he got it?"

Steve shrugged. He seemed to pull himself out of a cold, deep pit. "I don't know." He let Lance down, searched through his pockets, with fingers that were numb, unfeeling. Keene stood over them, on his toes, his hands deep in his coat pocket.

From inside the drug store a radio crooned softly. A girl's young voice lifted in quick, unreserved laughter.

Steve's jaw went rock hard. Evidently no one in the drug store had heard anything, either. Yet from somewhere out of the stormy night death had struck silently and viciously, at Lance Boardman, private detective.

THEY had been kids together, in Fairhaven, a small coast town in Massachusetts. They had grown up on the same street. Steve had always been bigger, heavier than Lance. He had sort of looked out for him, taken his side in school scraps and gang fights. They had left the small town together, two restless youngsters with an itch for the brighter lights of the City. Lance, restless always, had drifted from reporting for the *Evening Times* to advertising, finally to running a one-man private detective agency.

Steve had joined the Force, after a year knocking about at odd jobs. That had been six years back. He had worked his way up the hard way.

He had seen less of Lance, during those years. But the bond between

them had remained. Then the Louis Kelzeck indictment had thrown them together for a spell again.

Steve's mind back-tracked two weeks as he stood looking down at the huddled figure. The rotten buildings racket had come to a head when a nearly completed public structure, under the personal supervision of Louis Kelzeck, who had been awarded the contract, had collapsed. Several bystanders and workmen were killed.

Kelzeck had built up a reputable standing as a contractor in the city.

He was indicted by a grand jury for the deliberate substitution of cheap building material in the construction of the public building, and was released on a \$50,000 bond.

Kelzeck, white-lipped and nervous, had pleaded guilty. He hinted of an organization behind him that had forced him to the use of the inferior material.

In the meantime, Lance Boardman had been hired by Kelzeck, for protection. Since the grand jury hearing the contractor had been afraid for his life.

Kelzeck was to have appeared at a special hearing, two weeks later. But he had been mysteriously killed, on the corner of Cedar and Court streets, as he was about to cross.

Lance had been with him that bleak afternoon Kelzeck had died—and had seen nothing. Nothing save Kelzeck suddenly crumpling up, gasping, with three bullet holes in his chest. But for the presence of other bystanders, who had witnessed the strange death of the beefy contractor, Lance would have been held by Homicide for the killing.

Steve Cronin thought of this as he straightened, his lips pulled hard against his teeth. Kelzeck had been killed to keep him from talking at the hearing. Now Lance—

He had found no trace of a memo book on the body. Keene came off his toes when Steve muttered the information. The Assistant D.A.'s eyes were cold, a little puzzled.

He said: "Maybe it was a phony tip at that, Steve. Looks like we came out on a wild—"

Steve faced Keene. His shoulders were tight against his coat, and his eyes were hard and dangerous.

"Somebody didn't think it was a phony tip!" he snapped. "Whoever it was, he shot Lance just as we got here!"

Keene shrugged. The wind was whistling along the avenue with a cold thin wailing. The D.A. man stamped his feet to break the chill that bit at his toes.

He said: "I thought I saw him say something to you just before he died, Steve. Maybe—"

Steve nodded, frowning. "Something about a Redtop taxi— Holy hell!" he suddenly growled. "I must be getting thick. That's it, Keene! That's where he hid Kelzeck's memo! He was riding in a Redtop to my apartment when Massity's hoods cut him off. He must have hidden the evidence in the cab, before making a break for it. It's got to add up that way, Keene!"

The Assistant D.A. said: "Well, it's a lead. Go ahead, follow it up. I'll take care of things here. I'll have to call Stearn into it, of course. If you want to get in touch with me tonight, call at Homicide. I'll be in the office, waiting for your report."

Steve nodded. He looked down at Lance's stiffening body. The lump in his throat made it hard for him to swallow. "They'll pay, Lance," he said harshly. "All of them!"

THE Redtop Garage was a big, dirty brick building on Cove, in the north end of town. Snow was banked along the front, except at the entrance, where a wiry, coveralled man was shoveling the driveway clear.

Steve got out of the taxi, swung with long strides toward the garage entrance. The wiry man looked up as he said: "I'm looking for the night man around here, buddy?"

The other looked him over slowly. "See Jim. He's in the office."

Steve went inside the building, found the walled off cubicle that passed for an office. He could see a man bent over a desk as he approached the grimy windows. He knocked once on the door, went in.

The man in the chair was stocky, a thatch of straw hair showing above a green eyeshade. He said: "Well, what—" He closed his mouth, his eyes narrowing, as Steve showed him the badge.

"I want to look over one of your cabs," he said quietly. "One of your drivers picked up a fare on Kensington, from an office in the Lorraine Building. They had some trouble on the way, and the fare left the cab. Driver's name was Jan—something like that."

The stocky night man came out of his chair. "Yeah," he nodded. "That's right. Eddie Jandell—drives number 14. Came in with a scraped running board and front fender, and something haywire in the transmission. Seemed scared. We got the cab on the lift now. But Eddie's out with number 34. You want me to get Eddie for you?"

Steve said: "Not now. Just the cab will do."

He followed the stocky man out of the office. A row of cabs was ranged along the west wall. A single droplight shone weakly here. There were oil stains on the cement flooring, and the smell of oil and gasoline in the air.

Number 14 was on the lift in the back corner of the garage. The stocky nightman moved to the wall, amidst an assortment of grease and oil containers. He turned a wheel on the compressed air pipeline, stepped on a pedal in the floor. Released air made a high sighing in the stillness.

The lift dropped slowly, settled. Steve pulled open the cab's back door, stepped in. He fumbled around the rear cushions, his eyes hard. He switched on the back light, and found the memo book tucked between the arm rest and the back cushion. A leaf from a notebook was held by a rubber

band to the memo cover. Lance's handwriting was scrawled on it:

Finder—

Please see that this gets into the hands of Steve Cronin, of the D.A.'s office.

Steve backed out of the cab, his lips thin. Behind him he heard a dull, meaty thud—a half-muffled gasp. The sound whipped him around, his hand sliding into his coat pocket.

The man with the automatic was big—bigger than Steve. He was heavy in the shoulders, in the waist. His starched shirt front gleamed in the dim light. He was in dinner clothes, and he was smiling suavely, his white teeth reflecting the light. A trim black mustache gave a fullness to a thin upper lip. Standing there, his well-tailored blue overcoat open, his dinner jacket fitting snug, he might have been some prosperous banker.

But the two men with him spoiled the illusion. Cheap hoods, both—Cronin had seen them before.

The big man said, without moving: "Well, well—if it ain't Steve Cronin! Playing around in taxi cabs!"

STEVE'S shoulders loosened. He was conscious of the memo book in his hand as he let his gaze drop to the crumpled night man. He was sprawled out between them, his left cheek pressed against a splatter of old oil, a thin trickle of blood seeping down over his right eye.

Steve said: "Still up to your old tricks, eh, Massity. Must be an important job, to bring you out on a night like this."

Massity's smile widened. "It is, Steve—it is." He moved forward then, the false humor in his eyes thinning. "Give, Steve!"

Cronin's solid frame tightened. His gaze moved down to the steady blue barrel of Massity's automatic, and he knew the big racketeer would shoot for that little memo book. Shoot to kill.

He handed out the book, his eyes hard. Massity slipped it into his pocket.

et, stepped back. Limpy, the cadaverously thin, sallow-faced gunster at his right side, lifted the gun in his scrawny fist.

"Now, boss?" he said tonelessly.

Massity's gaze moved to the front of the garage where the dim figure of the man shoveling the entrance-way moved.

"No," he said sharply. "Take him to the waterfront somewhere, and give him a bath. Make sure he soaks for a long, long time."

Limpy grinned, showing yellow stubs of teeth. "He'll soak, boss—good!"

They went out through a back door that opened into an alley. A heavy sedan lay like a black crouched animal against the snow. Massity got in front with the silent, beady-eyed Morrison. Limpy, chuckling coldly, got in back with Steve. He kept his gun resting on his lap, pointed at Steve, and never took his eyes from him.

They pulled up by the 44 Club, Massity's night spot. Massity got out here, pulled his collar against the driving storm. He looked in at Steve, grinning mirthlessly.

"Hope you enjoy your bath, copper!" he sneered. "It's gonna be your last!"

Then Morrison shifted into gear, and the car slid away like some prowling ghost, swung east toward the waterfront.

The snow-laden wind came in hard, sudden flurries that rocked the heavy sedan, tore at it with gritty fingers. The headlights cut like yellow torches through the thick veil.

Morrison hunched over the wheel, his beady eyes probing through the wiper space. The cigarette between his lips hung slack, and small tendrils of blue smoke drifted up over his sharp face to dissolve abruptly in some overhead draft.

Limpy, sitting way back from Steve, the gun in his fist glinting with a dull shine, chuckled constantly. A soft grating sound that locked Steve's jaws.

No one made conversation. The heavy sedan slid along the practically deserted streets, passing few other cars on the way. They turned down St. John's Hill, slowing to a snail's pace for the turn into Vesey Street. And even at that the sedan skidded, rocked dangerously, before Morrison gained control of it.

Limpy seemed glued in his corner. He never took his eyes from Steve. Out of the side of his mouth, he said to Morrison:

"Verrill's dock, Pete. That's the best."

The big car prowled along Vesey, a dark waterfront stretch of old warehouses, shabby, many of them empty. The King's Shoals foghorn pierced the night—hoarse and insistent.

THEN Morrison slowed, tooled the sedan in between dark brick buildings. The wind whistled sharply through the alley from off the stormy bay. Steve looked through the wiper space on the snow-blanketed windshield. He saw the alley open up, give way to a narrow, sagging wooden pier. The place was deserted and slick, kept clean of snow by the driving wind.

This was it, he thought grimly. This was where Steve Cronin made his last play. The muscles in his big shoulders crawled.

The sedan slid to a noiseless stop on the very edge of the rickety pier. From his side of the car Steve looked down on a five-foot margin of bare, icy planking—then at the dark, tossing waters that lapped restlessly against the ice-encrusted supports.

A cold, ominous second dragged by as Morrison turned, looked questioningly at Limpy. Steve's lips tightened. Were they going to shoot him in the car?

Limpy's thin, chuckling tone said: "Why bloody up the boss' car, Morrison. Outside'll do."

Morrison shrugged. He turned, started to click open the door at his elbow. Limpy, edging forward, said:

"All right, Steve—out!"

Steve opened the door without a word. The raging wind tore into the car, pushed against the door so that he had to exert strength to keep it open. He lifted his big frame off the cushions, started through. His back muscles were tight, prickly, with the grim expectancy of the slug he knew was coming.

Up in front Morrison was sliding out, cursing the cold wind. He was turned partially away from Steve, his gun loose in his right hand.

Steve snapped his big body around in a swift, desperate move. His left elbow slammed against the sedan door. The force of it combined with the pressure of the howling wind drove it back, hard, into Limpy's face just as he came forward, ducking his head to follow Steve through. The gun in his fist went off convulsively as he fell back, his nose streaming blood, his head whirling.

The slug whined off the steel panel, scraped a raw gash along Steve's left ribs. But the D.A. dick was moving fast for the startled Morrison, who swung around too late.

Steve's big hand clamped like a vise on Morrison's gun wrist. A pained gasp issued from the beady-eyed gunster's lips. He dropped the gun on the planking. And Steve hit him, with the same pivoting motion. Hit him with all the shocking power of his brawny shoulders behind a right cross up to Morrison's pointed chin.

Morrison went back on staggering legs. Then he seemed to vanish, drop down out of sight. A small splash came back to Steve, bending swiftly for the gun Morrison had dropped.

He straightened with it just as Limpy appeared in the rear doorway of the sedan. He shot twice, his body braced against the buffeting, icy wind, his lips pulled thin and hard against his teeth.

Limpy jerked like a rag doll. Then he fell forward, out of the car. He moved a little on the icy planks, before he stiffened.

Steve turned slowly, went to the edge of the pier. He was breathing harshly. He looked down into the dark, tossing waters where Morrison had dropped. There was nothing save the lapping of the waves against the posts. The high thin wailing of the storm seemed an epitaph to a pair of gunsters who had taken their last ride.

HARD-FACED, Steve dumped Limpy's body into the back of the blue sedan. He got in under the wheel, backed the car off the pier through the narrow alley. Out on Vesey he turned, sent it rolling uptown, for the 44 Club.

His face was grim in the soft glow of the dashlight. His side burned with painful insistency. But he had no time to stop, have the bullet gash attended to.

He had to get back to the 44 Club. Get to Massity before the big gang boss could destroy that black memo book Lance Boardman had died for. The Kelzeck memo that would break the back of the crooked organization behind the buildings racket—drag into the open the higher city officials with whose sanction and graft the racket had operated.

Steve made the 44 Club at 11.04. He noted the time on the dash clock as he pulled up the handbrake. And he had a moment of wonder that but two hours had passed since he had left his apartment to see Lance die.

He parked the big sedan around the corner, in foot-high curb snow. He pulled his hat lower over his eyes, hitched up his coat collar. His right hand was gripped about the Luger he had retrieved from Limpy's body as he went up the short stone steps to the 44 Club.

The hat-check girl eyed him curiously. Her gaze lingered on the hard slant of his jaw, the way his right hand was bunched in his coat pocket. At the entrance to the dining room a dinner-jacketed, powerful looking man turned a pug face toward him.

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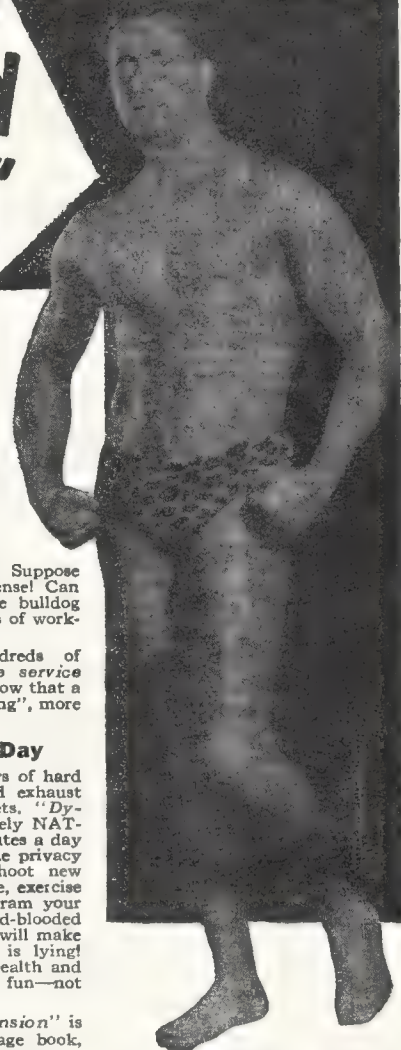
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Steve's hand moved upward in his coat pocket as he said, softly:

"Come here, Burke."

Burke hesitated. He had a gun in a shoulder clip under his right arm, but he forgot about it when he looked into Steve's eyes. He came over to Cronin, his broad, tissue-scarred face taut and wary.

"What's the beef, Cronin?" he said.

Steve asked: "Where's Massity? Talk straight, Burke—and don't try to think!"

Burke licked his lips. "In his office. He was in the dining room, looking over the crowd. But he got a call and went to his office to take it. Just now."

"All right, Smoky. Lead the way," Steve ordered.

They went down the short corridor, Steve just behind the pug-faced triggerman. Burke stopped in front of a hardwood door and nodded.

Steve reached his left arm around into the ex-prizefighter's coat front, pulled out a short barreled .38 from the holster clip. He dropped the gun into his pocket, motioned Burke in ahead of him.

Massity was at his desk, a phone at his mouth. He was saying: "Got it right here, now." He was tapping the desk top with Kelzeck's memo book as he talked. "Enough in it to cinch us for the Tombs for life." His lips were curling coldly as he started to look up toward the door. "I'm keeping it! It'll come in handy in case you ever try—"

He jerked, dropped the phone back onto its cradle. Steve kicked the door shut, motioned Burke to one side. The gun in his fist was very steady.

"I don't like to take a bath in this weather, Massity," he said evenly. "Morrison took it for me. Limpy laughed too much, but the joke was on him." He moved in slowly, his eyes on Massity's face. The suavity was stripped from the big man's face. There was a tight, trapped look about his mouth.

Steve reached the desk, faced Massity across it. His voice was suddenly

toneless as he demanded: "Now give!"

Massity slid the book across the desk. Steve pocketed it, without looking inside it. He stood, big framed, slouched, looking down at Massity, and remembering Lance lying cold and still in the snow.

His voice cracked a little. "There's more than the Tombs in it for you, Massity. They burn rats in this state, for murder."

FORCING a sneer to his lips, Massity said: "You won't be able to pin any killings on me, Steve. Not Kelzeck's killing—or Lance's."

Steve said: "We'll see. Get up—and keep your hands away from that drawer! That's better," he nodded grimly.

"We're going for a ride," he added softly. He saw Massity's eyes widen, and he sneered. "Not the kind you sent me on. We're going to headquarters."

He moved around the desk, to Massity, slid an experienced hand over the racketeer's frame. The man was clean.

Moving to the silent Burke, he cuffed the triggerman to the softly hissing radiator. "Keep your mouth closed, Burke, and you'll probably live through this," he informed metalically.

He paced back to the desk, keeping his attention on Massity, and dialed a number. A voice answered, and he said: "Steve calling . . . Keene, of the D.A.'s office. Huh? He went out ten minutes ago? Then give me Captain Stearn of Homicide." He waited till Stearn's deep voice answered. "Cronin," he said shortly, "I've arrested Bill Massity. Send a couple of men out to meet me. At the 44 Club. Yeah—the Kelzeck killing and the Boardman. I got the evidence." He hung up, came around the desk.

Massity said: "You haven't got a bit of evidence on those killings, and you know it, Steve. You won't be able to pin—"

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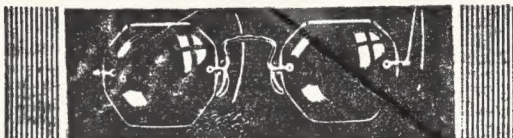
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Steve said. His gaze ranged to the scowling Burke, cuffed to the radiator, and something seemed to click in his mind. He moved up to the hard-faced club owner, said: "We'll wait for the Homicide dicks in your car, Massity. I don't like it around here."

They went out, down the short corridor, Massity leading. The hat-check girl looked after them curiously as they went by.

The icy wind buffeted them as they came out to the steps. Steve said: "Around the corner, Massity. We'll keep Limpy company."

Massity walked silently. Steve paced him, a little to one side and a step behind, his eyes cold. The wind had ebbed a little, and the snow had become fine granules of ice that bit into their faces.

Ahead of them a car's headlights, moving at a moderate pace, sprinkled light over them. Massity's head lifted. He stiffened strangely, a harsh, choked cry escaping him.

They were on the corner, about to turn down the side street to Massity's sedan, parked down the block. The headlights of the oncoming car sprayed them as it suddenly swung in a sharp turn into the side street.

Steve moved instinctively, warned by Massity's stiffening frame. He jumped back and down. All in that same quick motion, he saw a blurred red flare lick out from behind that turning car's modernistic grillwork. A silent, prolonged flare of death.

Massity, whirling, started to crumple. He went down slowly, the way Lance had gone earlier in the evening, a gray, pained look in his eyes.

Then the gun in Steve's fist jerked, slammed its vicious burst through the windshield of the long black sedan. The swinging car kept turning as the blurred face behind the wheel slumped down out of sight. The motor suddenly roared heavily, as if a dead foot were on the accelerator. The sedan climbed the sidewalk, crashed heavily against a darkened store front.

MASSITY was dead. The killer behind the wheel of the death car had been hauled out of the wreckage and laid beside Massity. He breathed harshly, with blood in his mouth. Steve knew he would be dead before the ambulance arrived.

Captain Stearn was beside Steve. He and several of his men had arrived there two minutes after the shooting.

Steve was looking down at the bloody-lipped killer, an edge of surprise in his eyes. "Keene!" he said slowly. "It was Keene who killed Louie Kelzeck—and Lance Boardman. With that damned ingenious rig he had set up in his car. A silenced gun, set behind the radiator grillwork, lined up so that the winged radiator ornament served as a sight for the target he aimed at.

"The trigger was worked by a foot button, up out of easy sight, under the wheel. All he had to do was swing the car's front around till the winged Mercury lined up with his victim, and step on the button—"

Stearn nodded. "From what I can gather, he was up against it when Kelzeck was indicted and gave evidence of breaking down. He was the real brains behind the racket, and Kelzeck's testimony would have broken him. He and Massity had used Kelzeck as their front to obtain juicy city contracts.

"They were holding over Louie's head the threat to expose his illegal entry into the country to the authorities. But Massity overplayed his hand when he supplied Kelzeck with material that was so lousy it didn't stand up. Hell!" Stearn growled. "These rats always slip up, in the end."

Steve shrugged, watched with hard eyes as the morgue ambulance drew up by the curb. A small crowd had collected about the wrecked sedan.

"I was with Keene when he killed Lance," he muttered. "Rode with him while he shot Lance, right under my nose. And I never suspected. Not till Massity and his hoods showed up at the Redtop Garage, right on my heels.

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There was only one way Massity could have known so quickly. Someone had phoned him. And there was only one man who knew where I had gone." He shrugged again, slowly, looked up at the sky where patches of dark star-flecked black indicated the storm was blowing itself out.

He seemed to see Lance—see his restless, eager face. Steve turned, left Stearn take charge of the mess. He felt tired, and a little empty—and he figured he needed a drink.

The wind whistled cold and cheerlessly through his flapping coat as he walked.

